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How Nonbinary College Students at Southern Universities Explore Identity Through Gender Expression

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How Nonbinary College Students at Southern Universities Explore Identity Through Gender Expression

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Abstract

As the number of young people identifying as nonbinary continues to increase (Davis, 2018), our need, as educators, to understand their experiences on college campuses also increases. Using narrative inquiry and photovoice, framed by critical queer theory and genderism, this examined both institutionalized and socially constructed expectations and influences that affect the development of nonbinary gender expression and identity for the college students by addressing the research question: What are the experiences of nonbinary college students in the Southern United States in exploring their gender expression at research universities? The five major themes that emerged from this study were as follows: symbiotic relationship between identity and expression, queer community and kinship, written and unwritten dress codes, campus as contradictory, and the interconnectedness of gender expression with other salient identities. This study offers avenues for higher education and student affairs educators to better support and affirm the experiences of nonbinary college students.

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Dedication

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Introduction

An increasing number of people are identifying as nonbinary, rejecting the man-woman gender binary in defining their identities. Over the last decade, the number of people identifying as nonbinary has doubled, seemingly led by younger generations (Davis, 2018). There have been several highly publicized instances of people coming out as nonbinary. For example, celebrities like *Queer Eye*'s Jonathan Van Ness and *The Hate U Give* star Amandla Stenberg, among others, have revealed that they identify as nonbinary over the last few years (Fuentes & Olson, 2021). As more people begin to identify as nonbinary or genderqueer, college campuses will increasingly reflect this societal change. Relatively few studies explore the experiences of nonbinary or genderqueer students, especially in the South, a region with a long history of hostility toward those who transgress sexual and gender norms. The limited existing research has shown that college campuses are not providing adequate support to nonbinary students. For example, Beemyn (2019) in a nationwide survey of queer college students and recent graduates, found that nonbinary students reported that their universities did not provide gender-inclusive bathrooms, consistently misgendered and misnamed students, reinforced gender binary through records and forms, failed to offer gender-inclusive housing, lacked trans-inclusive healthcare, and lacked trans-supportive spaces. Furthermore, students in this study were less likely to seek support from LGBTQ+ centers (27%), faculty members (7%), counseling centers (4%), and staff members (2%), than they were from their friends (79%) or LGBTQ+ student organizations (39%). Findings from this study indicate that campus educators need to understand the experiences of nonbinary students more fully, and, with an increasing number of students who

identify outside the binary, campus educators who do not understand nonbinary students' experiences are already behind in offering adequate support to these students.

Campuses continually reinforce gender binary. In October 2009, Morehouse College, an elite men's, historically Black college, instituted a dress code at the direction of President Robert M. Franklin. The dress code was part of President Franklin's appeal for students to encapsulate five wells: "well read, well spoken, well traveled, well dressed and well balanced" (as cited in Jaschik, 2009, para. 1). Among the various dress items barred were caps, do-rags, hoods (while indoors), sunglasses, grillz, clothing with lewd comments, sagging pants, pajama pants, and women's clothing and accessories (Gasman, 2009). Besides the obvious effect of this institutionalized dress code upon the Black students at Morehouse, the intentional banning of women's clothing in this policy presents further complications for students who may identify as genderqueer or who may choose to wear clothes traditionally associated with women.

This issue is not unique to Morehouse College. In a recent (and now deleted) tweet that set academic Twitter ablaze, a student applying to doctoral programs noted that among other things, one application asked potential students to provide how their peers would "describe [the applicant's] appearance, style, dress, or mannerisms" as an attempt to understand the applicant's gender expression (Hinckley, 2019). Ethical concerns regarding admission practices aside, it is possible that an applicant may not feel comfortable putting information regarding their gender identity and expression into the hands of an unseen, unknown admissions officer. Asking such a question could potentially force students in the closet for the sake of respectability politics, wherein they attempt to distance themselves from their minoritized identity for the sake of fitting in, or potentially cause anxiety in the case that they choose to disclose a minoritized gender identity.

Recently, the policing of dress and gender expression made national news. In April 2021, a gay teen in Tennessee was preparing to attend his prom with his boyfriend. The teen Dalton Stevens, wanting to make a bold statement during his senior-year dance, donned a bright red, flowing tulle gown, while his boyfriend wore a traditional black tuxedo. While posing for photos, the couple were ridiculed with homophobic language by Sam Johnson, a grown man and CEO of a local telemedicine company. The harassment was filmed and shared publicly, leading VisuWell, the telemedicine company, to condemn Johnson and ultimately remove him from his position (Wicker, 2021).

While policing of expression can happen by strangers, such as in the previous case, it is also often institutionalized. In December 2020, a Texas school suspended an openly gay, cisgender male teen for wearing nail polish to school, which was strictly prohibited for "boys" according to their dress code (Yurcaba, 2021). Trevor Wilkinson, the teen, was told that he could remain in suspension, remove the nail polish, or move to remote learning; however, the teen wanted to make a stand against the discriminatory dress code, refusing to remove the nail polish. Eventually, the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas sent a letter to more than 400 Texas school districts informing them that their policies were discriminatory, and the teen spoke in front of his own school board addressing the discriminatory policies. Ultimately, due to the teen's efforts, the school district changed its policies, creating a completely gender neutral dress code that no longer enforced gender binary restrictions (Yurcaba, 2021).

While these examples both include students who identify as men at the center, it is important to recognize the ways that gender expression are policed, both socially (like with Stevens) and institutionally (as with Wilkinson), as nonbinary people may face increased resistance when navigating gendered policies and expectations around gender expression. When

writing for Refinery29, Hall (2019) shared that they are often told, "'But you don't *look* nonbinary!'" (para. 1) when disclosing their identity to someone. They go on to write, "the reality is that there's no one way to be nonbinary. Some of us look androgynous; others don't … the only commonalities between nonbinary people are that we see gender as a spectrum, and we fall somewhere in the middle" (para. 2). Furthermore, Hall notes that "playing around with your appearance" (para. 3) is an important way for nonbinary people to not only explore their gender identity but also communicate it to others.

Each of the examples above occurred in states—Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas—located in the South, a region with a troubling history related to minoritized sexuality and gender expression. In addition to formal, institutionalized dress codes, there are informal, socialized dress codes existing at institutions in the South. Informal, unwritten, campus dress codes, where social implications may dictate how a student should dress, apply make-up (or not), and wear their hair, may shift how nonbinary students perceive campus climate at their respective institutions. Research has shown that queer and transgender students are marginalized on college campuses (Brown et al., 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Garber, 2002), and limiting expression through formal and informal dress codes could potentially increase feelings of marginalization. As such, it is important to understand how nonbinary students perceive their ability to express themselves in identity-affirming and exploratory ways. These challenges may be amplified in locations long hostile to those breaking gender and sexual norms. The literature review of the present study demonstrates the historical and contemporary mistreatment of queer students in the South, necessitating a deeper examination of nonbinary students' experiences at higher education institutions in the South. Understanding this phenomenon could lead to a warmer campus climate for students who identify as nonbinary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how nonbinary college students in the Southern United States experience exploring and expressing their gender identity while enrolled at research institutions. Furthermore, this study attempts to examine both institutionalized and socially constructed expectations and influences that affect the development of nonbinary gender expression and identity for the college students. To better understand this phenomenon, I seek to explore the following research question:

1. What are the experiences of nonbinary college students in the Southern United States in exploring their gender expression at research universities?

Conceptual Framework

The current study is framed within a critical queer framework as well as through genderism. Both critical queer theory and genderism are used throughout the entire research process, from informing protocol to providing a lens for interpreting interview and photovoice data. Both are briefly described in the following sections and are given more attention in chapter three of this manuscript, including discussion on how queer theory and genderism relate to and inform the study protocol.

Critical Queer Theory

Queer theory emerged as a critical framework in the 1990s. It is built upon challenging heteronormativity and assumptions about normality (Abes, 2007). Queer theory also moves beyond gender and sexuality binaries and suspends direct classifications of identity such as “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “masculine,” and “feminine” (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). This suspension is based upon the principle that identity is not fixed, but rather performed and

unstable (Butler, 1990) as well as fluid (Fuss, 1989). Queer theory also considers intersecting identities as well as systems of power and oppression that "privilege some and silences others" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 65). Queer theory informed all aspects of the study from planning interview protocols, to interacting with participants, and to interpreting the data. In chapter three, queer theory's utility in the study will be discussed in more detail.

Genderism

The study is also framed by Bilodeau's (2007) conception of genderism, which is "the belief of assumption that there are two, and only two genders" (Bilodeau, 2007, p. 71). Genderism, as a construct, associates biological sex to an ideal appropriate gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (Lev, 2005). Genderism is both enacted and maintained at a systemic level on college campuses, as "norms in college environments created standards and accountability for being seen as male or female" (Bilodeau, 2007, p. 72). And, as Bilodeau (2007) wrote, genderism is enacted and maintained through "implicit and explicit laws, rules, and policies" (p. 72). It is important to note that genderism is both practiced and perpetuated by institutions and those who work within them, and explicitly not a value of me as researcher. Genderism, as with queer theory, is both an analytical tool and a guide to all interactions and conversations with participants. The application of genderism to this study will be reviewed more in chapter three.

Significance of the Study

As the number of young people identifying as nonbinary continues to increase (Davis, 2018), our need to understand their experiences on college campuses increases. As found by Renn (2010) and Lange et al. (2019), there is a significant lack of research on queer identities in higher education, even more so among trans and nonbinary identities. Renn (2010) specifically

called for “increased use of queer theory and new research approaches” (p. 138) when examining the experiences of queer and trans students. Lange et al. (2019) noted that though Renn’s (2010) has been met to an extent, there are still gaps to be filled by higher education researchers. As the authors argued, “Only a small fraction of literature describes the lives of nonbinary transgender collegians… it is vital for scholars and practitioners to be sensitized to their experiences in research and practice” (Lange et al., 2019, pp. 519-520). This study was rooted in understanding how nonbinary college students at Southern institutions experience exploring and defining their gender expression, thus meeting the need identified by Renn (2010) and Lange et al. (2019).

Just as Renn (2010) and Lange et al. (2019) called for expanded methods in understanding queer and trans students experiences, Flint and Toledo (2021) called for an expansion of artful inquiry within higher education research. The authors examined 20 years of higher education research, and they noted an overall increase in the number of published studies using artful methods. Furthermore, Flint and Toledo (2021) argued that artful research paired with reflection becomes a “transformative tool for inquiry” (p. 258), and that there is “substantial room for experimentation, possibility, and methodological creativity” (p. 258) in using artful methods in higher education research. This study met the call of Flint and Toledo (2021) by purposefully using an artful method of photovoice, paired with reflection, to better understand nonbinary students’ experiences.

Through answering the calls of Renn (2010), Lange et al. (2019), and Flint and Toledo (2021), this study will benefit higher education and student affairs (HESA) practitioners, faculty members, current students, and future students. By understanding nonbinary students’ experiences exploring and expressing gender, we can work towards creating a campus climate

that is both more affirming and welcoming, which could improve how nonbinary students experience campus, and their outcomes from higher education.

Definitions

Below are a few terms with accompanying definitions relevant to the current study.

1. *Dress codes*: Dress codes refer to a set of rules, whether specific or customary, that mandate how individuals must dress in a particular environment.
    a. *Institutionalized (written):* This refers to formalized dress codes that are found written in some conduct or procedural handbook or agreement. This refers to dress codes that may be mandated in offices, venues, or at events (like a campus job fair). Institutionalized dress codes are typically created and required by people in authority or power and come with expected behavior, denote membership, and have meaning tied to position (Rubinstein, 2001). These typically have clear consequences for those who stray from what is deemed "appropriate" and "acceptable" in each environment.
    b. *Socialized (unwritten):* This refers to informal dress codes that may be, in a sense, mandated by social customs or cues. They typically revolve around respectability or social spheres. Typically, they will be defined by those with social power in a particular environment (Rubinstein, 2001). While there may be no explicit consequences of "straying" in this sense, not following socialized dress codes could lead to social exclusion or ostracization.
2. *Gender expression*: According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2015), gender expression refers to the ways an individual presents their gender identity through both physical appearance and actions. Gender expression can include things like hair,

makeup, body modifications (e.g., piercings, tattoos), and dress. Dress is often seen as a form of communication (Barnard, 1996) and was considered as such in this study. For example, someone may be assigned male at birth and identify their gender as masculine or man but express their gender in more traditionally feminine ways (wearing dresses, make up, well-groomed hair, etc.). Often sexuality-based stereotypes lead people to infer sexual orientation from such physical cues (Nicolazzo, 2017); however, it is important to note that sexual orientation is a distinct construct. Sexual orientation pertains to an individual's sexual and emotional attraction and resulting behaviors or social affiliations from such attractions (APA, 2015).

3. *Gender identity*: Gender identity is defined as an individual's internal or "deeply felt" sense of being a man, woman, or "alternative" gender (APA, 2015, p. 862). Here, we already see distinctions between sex, the physical, and gender, the felt. Both sex and gender are commonly mistaken as binary systems, ignoring those who may be intersex or nonbinary.
4. *Genderqueer*: The APA (2015) defines genderqueer as a gender identity which does not align within a binary gender system; as such, people may define themselves as both man and woman, neither man or woman, moving between genders, or embodying a new gender.
5. *Nonbinary:* nonbinary, like genderqueer, is typically defined as "any gender identity that does not fall within the strict categories of contemporary Western societies, which typically consider gender to be binary, e.g., either man or woman" (Webb et al., 2015, p. 1). It is common for other identity markers—genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, bigender—to fall under the umbrella term nonbinary (Webb et al., 2015). I used Webb et

al.'s (2015) definition of nonbinary as an umbrella term for individuals who identify outside of a gender binary.

6. *Queer*: I used the word "queer" when describing individuals who identify on the spectrum of LGBT identities. While "queer" has historically been used to demean or deride LGBT individuals, contemporary use of "queer" is often used to reclaim ownership by many LGBT-identified people, thus destigmatizing its impact. In this study, I mirrored the language used by participants in expressing their own identities.
7. *Sex*: Sex is typically defined as an identity marker assigned at birth "based upon the appearance of external genitalia" or potentially via characteristics like internal genitalia, hormones, or chromosomes (APA, 2015, p. 862).
8. *Transgender*: Transgender is often used as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not conform to their sex assigned at birth (APA, 2015), though some have denoted it trans* with an asterisk to denote any gender identity that is not cisgender and inclusive of the spectrum of trans* identities (Nicolazzo, 2017; Tompkins, 2014).

Though this study did not focus on sexuality, it is important to understand the interrelations and differences between gender, sex, and sexuality, as previous research often conflated the three (Renn, 2010). However, as previous studies have used trans*, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming when speaking about the same population, I mirrored authors' original language to avoid confusion while reviewing literature. When sharing on behalf of my own participants, I mirrored the language they chose to use when describing their own gender identities and gender expressions.

Brief Overview of Methods and Procedures

The current study is qualitative in nature, which "seeks to explore and represent reality as it exists in context and to enlighten the ways in which individuals experience that reality" (Biddix, p. 76, 2018). The study was emergent in nature (Cresswell, 2014), and used elements of both narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013) and photovoice (Latz, 2017). Narrative inquiry is a research method focused upon retelling and making sense of the meaning attached to the stories of research participants (Riessman, 2008). In addition, a portion of this study was grounded using photovoice, a method through which participants are prompted to take photographs of places or moments that fit within the themes of the scope of the study (Latz, 2017). Through discussion and exploration, themes are derived from the photograph that add to the understanding of the research question at hand. The goal of using both narrative inquiry and photovoice in this study was to collaboratively explore nonbinary college students' experiences surrounding gender expression at research institutions in the South. Narrative inquiry will allow students to share their stories while photovoice provides a venue for students to document places and times that are meaningful to them in their exploration of gender identity. Both methods allowed for rich, thick description of nonbinary students experiences with gender expression within Southern institutions.

I used purposeful snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to identify participants via institutional gatekeepers, such as employees at university LGBTQ centers, as well as via participants who can share the study invitation with their peers who meet the participant qualifications of: 1) identifying as nonbinary, and 2) currently enrolled full-time as college students at research institutions located in the Southern U.S.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol which allowed participants to share their own experiences related to the research questions. I was able to ask follow-up questions related to

participants' experiences within the research questions in conjunction to the framework. Participants completed out a demographic survey, signed informed consent, and self-selected pseudonyms to be associated with their data. I also assigned a pseudonym to the institution to further protect anonymity of the research participants. Though, general categorical descriptions may be given if they are pertinent to the understanding of the findings.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

There are several limitations, delimitations, and assumptions that affected how the study was performed and how data was collected and analyzed. Included below is a brief overview of the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions that affected this study.

Limitations

This study was limited by its focus upon Southern institutions in the U.S. Furthermore, a potential limitation could be the demographics of the participants, as Southern, public institutions are often Whiter and more male when compared to national student enrollment averages. Both could potentially limit how data is interpreted and used following this study.

Delimitations

A future study could expand the reach to include additional institutions both in and out of the Southern United States. Furthermore, I am choosing to limit my participant pool to students who identify as nonbinary. While gender expression can at times be closely related to sexuality or sexual identity, the two are not dependent upon one another. It is possible that the nonbinary students will identify as also holding a queer sexual identity, but this will only be known if a participant chooses to disclose such an identity. It is important to note that though the intersection of having a queer sexual identity and queer gender identity could potentially change

how interview data is interpreted for an individual, I did not purposefully recruit college students who identified as both queer in their sexual identity and gender identity.

Assumptions

This study was informed by a few assumptions, most of which relate directly to the theoretical framework. In keeping with tenets of queer theory, I assumed that gender identity is indeed both performed and fluid, whereas it may change given a particular environment or a particular audience. Furthermore, informed by the literature, I assumed that campus environments will have both institutionalized (written) and socialized (unwritten) dress codes. These assumptions impacted both the ways data is collected and analyzed; thus, it was important that they were recognized.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined and briefly described the major portions of this study, including the purpose, significance, and research question that guided the study. Additionally, I briefly introduced the framework, methods, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. In the subsequent chapter, I will review major literature related to the research question.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

A college student, reflecting on their blog about what it's like to identify as nonbinary at a university on the west coast, recalled a conversation:

> "Today I played a card game with strangers. One person referred to me as 'she;' another person said 'he.' I said, 'Actually, I use they.' A third person piped up, and said: 'Ah, because you're a millennial.'
>
> 'No?' I said. 'It's because I'm trans.'" (Shields, 2017, para. 1-2)

The use of harmful, gendered language is not a new phenomenon on college campuses (Bazarsky et al., 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017), but such an exchange is no less striking. To date, there is a lack of research specifically on nonbinary students focused on understanding their experiences in higher education. Flint et al. (2019) provided one of the first studies that has "specifically examined the ways nonbinary and agender students navigate campus spaces" (p. 438). While research has shown the overall chilly nature of campuses for trans students (e.g., Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Rankin et al., 2010; Woodford et al., 2017), nonbinary students are often included as an asterisk next to the trans label. Moreover, research has shown that trans college students are, at times, presented challenges when it comes to freely expressing their gender on campus (Nicolazzo, 2017).

In this literature review, I made the case that there is room for research surrounding how nonbinary students explore and express their gender identity on college campuses in the South. I examined literature on the historical discrimination of queer students, gender identity development, nonbinary college students, and gender expression.

Queer Students' Experiences Throughout History

Throughout the history of higher education, queer students have faced openly hostile campuses. From a series of gay purges in the early 20th century (e.g. Dilley, 2002; Syrett, 2007) to simply struggling for recognition on campus (e.g. Beemyn, 2003; Hevel & Thompson, 2021), queer people have found higher education institutions to be unwelcoming and unready. In this section, I will briefly review literature surrounding queer students' experiences throughout history as well as show a pattern of mistreatment within Southern institutions.

Gay Purges in Higher Education

Throughout the 20th century (and arguably prior) gay students attended higher education institutions, though they often hid themselves and their identities. The most notable attributes of early college students, prior to women being allowed on campuses, were that they were wealthy, white men who dominated campus culture (Horowitz, 1987). Gay students were no different and came from the same affluent circles. For example, Syrett (2007) recounted the experiences of an early "homosexual community" at 1920s Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Opening his study, Syrett wrote:

> It was there [in Beaver Meadow] in the early to mid-1920s that an all-male group of Dartmouth students and recent graduates stayed in a house where, free from the regulatory eyes of their faculty, they had parties, stayed up late, drank alcohol, and had sex. With each other. (p. 9)

The men in this community at Beaver Meadow were wealthy and White and belonged to several campus organizations, including Epsilon Kappa Phi, a fraternity on the Dartmouth campus. Furthermore, these men were highly involved in campus theater productions, with a few members typically taking on women's roles in campus productions (Syrett, 2007). Unfortunately

for the men, their parties and suspicions of sexual activity caught the attention of Dartmouth administrators. In 1925, Dartmouth President Hopkins wrote to leaders of the fraternity and spoke with students who attended the Beaver Meadow parties; however, he ultimately expelled one student, Joseph Goodwin, stating alcohol violations as the cause. Two other students faced heightened scrutiny by President Hopkins; however, both boys, Ralph Jones and McKay Patterson, had already graduated and only forfeited their fraternity membership as penance (Syrett, 2007). It is important to note that although alcohol remained the cited reason for investigations into the home at Beaver Meadow, President Hopkins acknowledged that most of his students drank (Syrett, 2007). The following year, perhaps coincidentally (or not), Dartmouth began to "import women" for female roles in stage productions (Syrett, 2007, p. 12), and, by 1929, abolished any form of drag in stage productions. In understanding then why these students were targeted, it is important to note how they defied typical gender stereotypes. According to Syrett (2007), the boys who faced tangible repercussions were seen by their peers as more effeminate and as having a certain "queer" aesthetic. The story of the boys at Beaver Meadow highlighted how genderism affected queer students even a century ago.

These "gay purges" were not unique to Dartmouth; in addition to genderism causing students to become targets, students who participated in or were accused of participating in gay sex acts found themselves facing expulsion and legal action. At Harvard, in the 1920s, similar purges occurred to a thriving homosexual subculture on campus (Wright, 2006). Cyril Wilcox, a first-year student at Harvard, died by suicide, leaving behind a letter that detailed his involvement within underground gay communities at Harvard that involved undergraduates, graduates, and faculty and staff. Wilcox's brother, upon reading the letter, used violence to secure a list of every known gay person on campus from Wilcox's ex-lover and then approached

Harvard administration. The administration, led by President Lawrence Lowell, then launched into a series of witch hunts and inquisitions that led to the removal of staff and students. Lowell even went so far as to remove university records of gay instructors, effectively eliminating them from Harvard's history in totality until Wright's (2006) examination of these actions. On an even darker note, these purges led to more students dying by suicide rather than face expulsion and public humiliation for their sexual orientations (Wright, 2006).

These purges continued well into the mid-20th century. Nash and Silverman (2015) examined gay purges in the 1940s at three higher education institutions, University of Texas, University of Wisconsin, and University of Missouri. In 1944, 10 faculty and 15 students were expelled after an investigation into homosexual activity on the campus of the University of Texas. Similarly, in 1948 at the University of Wisconsin, students who were found to have participated in homosexual activity were turned over to city police for prosecution and dismissed from the university. Students suspected of being gay were forced to undergo psychiatric evaluation and dismissed as medical cases (Nash & Silverman, 2015). Following the lead of Wisconsin, administrators at the University of Missouri sought out students who were suspected of being gay and expelled them without due process (Nash & Silverman, 2015).

Fighting for Recognition

This hostility towards queer students did not stop with campus purges and continued past the mid-20th century. Queer students at universities across the country fought for the right to organize and to be taken seriously by their campus administrators. A look at the first gay student organization at Cornell University demonstrates what this process entailed. In 1967, Cornell students, bolstered by the success of Columbia University's Student Homophile League (SHL), formed their own chapter of SHL (Beemyn, 2003). Though the process to organize was slow and

quiet at the beginning, the SHL chapter at Cornell faced opposition from university leaders as well as other students after changing the organization mission to explicitly state its desire to address issues related to homosexuality on campus (Beemyn, 2003). Many students feared the repercussions of associating with the SHL, even refusing to join the organization under a pseudonym for fear of social ostracization or expulsion from the university (Beemyn, 2003). Dilley (2019), after conducting archival research, demonstrated similar actions at 16 midwestern universities from the 1960s to the 1990s. Dilley's (2019) research showed that while gay students just wanted to provide spaces for students to come out, feel comfortable on college campuses, and overall assimilate to larger campus cultures, they were often met with resistance from campus leaders. In fact, many student affairs leaders, as well as local and state politicians, worked to eliminate these early LGBTQ student organizations. To accomplish their goals, throughout the late 20th century and leading up to the 1990s, these organizations often aligned with larger societal, activist movements. They turned their attention to beyond simple organization and recognition to fighting for non-discrimination policies and demonstrating anti-war leanings (Dilley, 2019). While this was the case at these Midwestern universities, universities in the South moved at a slower pace, and queer students often had to turn to the legal system to fight for recognition

Queer Students Experiences in the South

To demonstrate the hostility that students experienced in the south, it is important to understand the troubles queer students faced when it came to forming visible student organizations. Legal battles between queer student organizations at the University of Georgia, Texas A&M University (TAMU), and the University of Arkansas, as well as struggles for visibility at the University of Florida demonstrate this hostility.

University of Georgia. In the early 1970s, the Committee on Gay Education (CGE), a student organization for LGBTQ students at the University of Georgia (UG), successfully fought legal battles against their university administration (Cain & Hevel, 2021). Though the group unofficially formed in the late 1960s, their first public campus meeting in 1971 was met with immediate backlash and instances of homophobia from the campus community (Cain & Hevel, 2021). Shortly after, the group decided to host seek official recognition and host a dance, which again faced public scrutiny from campus administrators. CGE decided to move beyond campus systems and take UG to court. Their first legal dispute came when the CGE successfully secured an injunction from a local judge, which ultimately prevented UG administrators from cancelling an on-campus dance, which the CGE president claimed was the first such dance in the U.S South (Cain & Hevel, 2021). Their second victory came in federal court, when it was decided that UG could not bar the organization from accessing campus benefits afforded to other student organizations. As Cain and Hevel (2021) wrote, this decision resulted in "the first published decision involving a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer student organization in the United States" (p. 2) and spurred future lawsuits at higher education institutions across the country.

Texas A&M University. In the late 1970s, queer students at Texas A&M University (TAMU) sought recognition to use various campus resources available to other recognized student organizations, such as bulletin boards and campus banking. However, Dr. John Koldus, vice president of student services, circumvented usual decision-making processes and denied the organization's charter, which led to a nearly decade-long legal battle (Hevel & Thompson, 2022). Though the members of Gay Student Services (GSS) were optimistic given the successes of other queer student organizations that had fought and won the right to organize, they were

often met with outright homophobic behavior on campus, including a banner hanging from a campus building that read, “Aggies are not queers—beat the hell out of GSSO!” (Hevel & Thompson, 2022, p. 37) Furthermore, the Texas A&M Board of Regents vowed to fight the GSS every step of the way, citing that gay activities went against what TAMU stood for. Though the lawsuit filed by GSS members was initially dismissed, a series of appeals and future court cases ended with the U.S. Supreme Court denying TAMU’s appeal of the Fifth Circuit Court’s ruling in favor of GSS.

University of Arkansas. A similar case in the mid-1980s at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas demonstrated the hostility that queer students faced in the South. In the Fall semester of 1985, the Gay and Lesbian Student Association (GLSA) applied for funding from the Associated Student Government, and, though they were approved for funding the previous year, they were denied (Hevel & Thompson, 2018). GLSA leaders appealed the decision to Dr. Lyle Gohn, vice chancellor for student services, and subsequently to Chancellor Daniel Ferritor and later President of the university system Ray Thornton, but they were continually denied their appeal. So, just days after one of their signs was vandalized with spray paint that read, “FUCK OFF YOU QUEERS,” GLSA sued Dr. Gohn and the University of Arkansas Trustees in federal court. Represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, and after years of court appearances and appeals, GLSA won in the Eighth Circuit Court paving the way, not only for future queer students at the University of Arkansas but in all universities within the Eighth Circuit Court’s jurisdiction (Hevel & Thompson, 2018).

University of Florida. Though it did not result in a legal battle, discrimination against queer students at the University of Florida (UF) in the 1970s is another demonstration of the oftfen hostile campus climates queer students faced in the South. In the early-1970s, the Gay

Liberation Front (GLF) sought recognition on the UF campus. Unfortunately, Vice President of Student Affairs Lester Hale denied the group's charter citing how the university could not allow a group that promoted immoral behavior or sex deviation a charter, despite neither being a part of the groups mission (Clawson, 2015). In the face of resistance from fellow UF students and UF administrators, members of GLF turned to more militant, activist protest strategies to secure official recognition (Clawson, 2015). Despite their actions and increased visibility, GLF struggled for recognition. They did not receive an official, recognized charter from campus until they "reorganized themselves into a less radical group" named the Gay Community Service Center (Clawson, 2015, p. 219). Even after securing recognition, the organization continued fighting discrimination on campus for decades. As Clawson (2015) argued, though opinions towards queer people began to shift to more favorable views, these shifts occurred slower in the South, necessitating this type of continued action. This case at the University of Florida demonstrated how queer students were often held to unrealistic, unfair stereotypes (e.g., being assumed to be a group focused upon deviant sex acts), and how queer students were often forced to fight just to exist on campus spaces, something hard fought for in the Southern U.S.

Summary of Queer Students' Experiences Throughout History

The history of mistreatment against queer students is long, sad, and even violent. Queer students often found themselves facing opposition from campus leaders and their fellow students. From gay purges to legal battles, queer students often faced uphill battles to even exist on college campuses. Though this discrimination occurred at universities nationwide, the cases studied by Cain and Hevel (2021), Hevel and Thompson (2018, 2021), and Clawson (2015) demonstrated that hostility to queer students in the South who were just attempting to organize, extended beyond the rest of the nation. These studies, coupled with other examinations of queer

students' experiences in the South by Kilgo et al. (2019) and Means (2017) demonstrate a greater need for understanding of nonbinary students experiences in the Southern U.S. My study adds to the literature on queer students experiences by exclusively studying the experiences of nonbinary college students as they explore their gender expression while at research institutions in the South.

Gender Identity Development

To understand nonbinary college students' experiences with gender expression, it is important to consider gender identity development. According to the APA (2015), experiencing differences in sex assigned at birth and gender identity and gender expression can lead individuals to feel psychological distress. As Diamond (2020) wrote, distress "may be resolved by altering one's gender expression to coincide with gender identity" (p. 110). Thus, an exploration of gender expression is important in an individual's exploration of gender identity. According to Bilodeau (2009), the presence of genderism—or systemic assumptions of heteronormativity and binary gender—can hinder college students from exploring their gender identities. Patton, Renn et al. (2016) argued that there is no single, predominant gender identity development model applied to college students. As such, researchers have examined gender identity development through several development models.

Early models of gender identity development were typically framed within a binary understanding of gender. Furthermore, the first models of trans identity development were often very limited in their scope and did not consider nonbinary individuals in their model building. For example, Lewins (1995) built, what is considered to be, the first model of trans identity development, based upon work with male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals. Other theorists, such as Gagné et al. (1997) also built their model of trans identity development after

only considering the experiences of MTF transgender individuals. A later model by Devor (2004) included both MTF and female-to-male transgender individuals but did not consider those who identify as nonbinary. Each of the previous three models have been criticized for their limited scope and rigid, ordered stage progressions. Later models, which will be discussed below, were more inclusive in their scope.

Lev's Transgender Emergence

Lev (2004) proposed a model of transgender and nonbinary identity development called Transgender Emergence. This model consists of six stages including: (1) awareness; (2) seeking information/reaching out; (3) disclosure to significant others; (4) explorations (identity and self-labeling); (5) exploration (transition issues and possible body modification); and (6) integration (acceptance and post-transition issues).

In stage one of Lev's (2004) model, awareness, trans individuals are dealing with discomfort due to a realization that they have desires or needs outside of heteronormative culture. This is often accompanied by internal strife and discomfort from suppressing a trans or nonbinary identity. In stage two, seeking information/reaching out, individuals begin to seek education and support. Stage three, disclosure to significant others, involves telling spouses, partners, family members, or other close friends about their trans or nonbinary identity. Lev (2004) described stage three as being marked by anxiety due to fears of rejection or violence. After disclosure, stages four and five are all about exploration. Stage four involves exploring various trans identities and beginning self-labeling, while stage five consists of exploring the possibility of transitioning or body modification. These stages can at times have both physical and mental outcomes, as individuals may begin to look for new community with other trans or nonbinary individuals as well as facing effects of hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgeries.

The final stage, integration, is evidenced by individuals being able to integrate and synthesize their identity, often marked by pride. Though Lev (2004) argued that people may move through these stages in a less linear fashion than presented, Transgender Emergence, along with other stage-based models of identity development, have been critiqued for their rigidity (Patton et al., 2016). Furthermore, Lev (2004) has been critiqued for stage five, as many trans individuals may never seek to transition, modify their bodies, or begin hormone therapy.

Bilodeau's Model of Transgender Identity Development

Bilodeau (2005) adapted their model of transgender identity development from D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model for lesbian, gay, and bisexual development to "describe the experiences of transgender college students" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 191). Like Lev's (2004) model, Bilodeau proposed a six-process model described below. However, unlike Lev (2004), Bilodeau's model is not fixed, but instead fluid and multidimensional.

In process one, exiting a traditionally gendered identity, individuals are beginning to understand that they are gender variant. This process is also marked by one labeling their trans identity and beginning to disclose this identity to others. In process two, developing a personal transgender identity, trans individuals begin to reach stability through knowing themselves in relation to other trans people and questioning learned, internalized transphobia. In process three, developing a transgender social identity, individuals move further into understanding their relation to others by building new, supportive, accepting, and affirming social networks. The fourth process, becoming a transgender offspring, is marked by disclosing a trans identity to family members. In process five, developing transgender intimacy, trans individuals begin to create new intimate relationships, both physical and emotional. The final process entering a

transgender community, is focused upon social action, where one focuses on political activity and social action, supporting trans rights and causes.

Austin's Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Identity Navigation

A more recent model of trans and nonbinary identity development comes from Austin's (2016) grounded theory study of 13 transgender or gender nonconforming (TGNC) young adults. This model of identity development is perhaps the most important to the current study, as it is one of the first to explicitly include gender nonconforming people in both its conception and its applications. Austin's (2016) study revealed six, nonlinear, fluid themes associated with navigating a TGNC identity: (1) moving from uncertainty to knowing; (2) recognizing self in others; (3) finding me; (4) explaining work; (5) struggling for authenticity; and (6) evolving self-acceptance.

The first theme, moving from uncertainty to knowing, is described as a "multilayered process often wrought with confusion, uncertainty, and feelings of isolation" (Austin, 2016, p. 221). While some TGNC individuals have a sudden realization, many start with little understanding of transgender specific knowledge or information and begin to seek it out. During the second theme, recognizing self in others, TGNC people find importance in seeing, hearing, and meeting other trans individuals. This stage, due to the previous relative invisibility of trans people, is often marked by new feelings of liberation and freedom. Theme three, finding me, is marked by discovering congruence between "one's internal and external sense of gender … and living as one's core self" (Austin, 2016, p. 223). This phase is often accompanied by positive emotions as well as further comprehension and embracing of one's own gender identity. In theme four, explaining work, TGNC individuals can experience fear, exhaustion, and burden. During this phase, TGNC people are often left explaining their identities to others, due to overall

ignorance in larger society. While this is exhausting, this theme is often seen as necessary to be seen and valued. The fifth theme, struggling for authenticity, is marked by how TGNC individuals experience "ongoing interpersonal, contextual, physical, financial, and emotional barriers to living authentically" (Austin, 2016, p. 224). This theme can, at times, be marked by challenges due to marginalization in larger society. The final theme, evolving self-acceptance, is where TGNC individuals find comfort with their gender identity. This theme is often accompanied by feelings of being emboldened within their own identity, and, simultaneously, resilience to embrace their identity in the face of disapproval.

Austin's (2016) model provides a solid framework for understanding how gender nonconforming individuals experience the process of navigating gender identity. As one of the first models to include gender nonconforming people, this model greatly added to my study. Though this model is not specifically used as a framework in this study, I gained a better grasp of the experiences and emotions that nonbinary students may feel while exploring their own gender identities. Furthermore, through awareness of Austin's (2016) six themes, I have a better understanding of how gender expression has been a part of the gender identity development processes of my participants.

Summary of Gender Identity Models

Few models examine transgender identity development, and even fewer consider gender nonbinary identity development. However, some common themes between Lev's (2004), Bilodeau's (2005), and Austin's (2016) all include recognizing a trans identity, exploring and learning about trans identities, disclosing and/or teaching others about trans identities, and embracing a trans identity. Unfortunately, each model also outlines various forms of social and

emotional discomfort and potential rejection that trans and nonbinary individual's may face while navigating their gender identities.

While each of the models shares various themes, none specifically explore the ways that gender identity development may be affected by simultaneously navigating college. Furthermore, though some of the models examine transitioning and what that entails, they do not consider explorations of gender expression in conjunction with gender identity development. Future research can examine the interrelationship between gender expression and gender identity, as the two will presumably not develop in a vacuum, wholly independent of one another.

Nonbinary College Students

In recent years, the number of openly nonbinary students has swelled on college campuses (Beemyn, 2015; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). However, literature regarding nonbinary students' experiences is sparse (Lange, Duran, & Jackson, 2019; Renn, 2010). In a meta-review of LGBT-focused, higher education literature, Renn (2010) found that research on trans and nonbinary students' experiences made up a small portion of the overall landscape of research. A decade later, in a continuation of Renn's work, Lange, Duran, and Jackson (2019) found although new research on LGBT student experiences have increased, there is a need for focus on LGBT research, "committed to intersectional analysis…grounded in the lives of queer and trans people" (p. 520). The research that does exist on nonbinary college students' experiences tends to paint, at best, a chilly picture of campus for nonbinary students. My study adds to this gap identified by Renn (2010) and Lange et al. (2019) by providing an understanding of nonbinary college students' experiences with exploring gender expression at Southern research institutions.

At present, as argued above, there is a lack of trans and nonbinary college student focused literature within higher education research. This could be partially due to the issues in

understanding just how many nonbinary students there are on college campuses. Similarly, because nonbinary students tend to not be quantified accurately, their experiences are often conflated with those of trans or lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students. With that in mind, the experiences of nonbinary students are most often captured through campus climate studies. In the following sections, I will explore the issues with counting nonbinary students on college campuses and examine literature related to campus climate studies on nonbinary college students.

Quantifying Nonbinary Students

Quantifying the exact number of nonbinary students on campus is nearly impossible (Nicolazzo, 2017). The Williams Institute, using large-scale federal surveys, estimates that as little as 0.36% and as many as 0.95% of adults in the United States identify as transgender (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). Of that number, it is estimated that nonbinary people make up approximately 25-35% of trans populations (James et al., 2016; Barr et al., 2016; Mikalson et al. 2014). However, in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 14% of nonbinary respondents reported feeling uncomfortable when described as transgender (James et al., 2016). Stryker (2017) similarly found that nonbinary (including gender-noncomforming and genderqueer) people reject describing themselves as transgender, as the terms are "either old fashioned or too conceptually enmeshed in the gender binary" (p. 25). Thus, it is possible that any count of nonbinary people is wholly underestimated and inaccurate, especially given the common practice of lumping together any non-cisgender identity together as trans.

Institutions of higher education have historically struggled—or flat out refused—to collect demographic data on LGBT students (Beemyn, 2003; Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014). In fact, many institutions do not ask questions regarding LGBT identities on their admissions

applications. Outside of a few university systems in California, New York, Washington, and Wisconsin, Campus Pride (2020) has a meager list of institutions that ask any type of LGBTQ identity questions on their undergraduate or graduate applications and enrollment forms. Moreover, despite a push from queer and trans focused advocacy groups, the Common Application, which represents nearly 900 campuses and hosts more than 1 million student applications, does not include questions inclusive of sexuality or gender identity (Garvey, 2020). Such application practices render trans and nonbinary students invisible on college campuses, and, whether intentionally or not, reinforce the gender binary (Beemyn, 2005; Seelman, 2014; Seelmen et al., 2012).

Due to this lack of tracking, it is also impossible to know how nonbinary students are doing academically (Beemyn, 2003; Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014). While quantifying the number of nonbinary students may prove helpful in planning services and supporting a more inclusive environment (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014; Windmeyer, Humphrey, & Barker., 2013), there are further issues to tracking students. Mostly, gender identity is fluid (Butler, 1990), and college students' gender identities can potentially change over their time in college (Nicolazzo, 2017). If institutions of higher education wish to track their LGBT and nonbinary students, it must be a continual process, and simply adding a line to admissions applications will not be enough to obtain an accurate record of nonbinary students on campuses. Though this study was not focused upon rectifying the issues in quantifying the number of nonbinary students on college campuses, by understanding nonbinary students' experiences, we can begin to push back against the invisibility and anonymity that nonbinary students face at an institutional level.

Campus Climate

Campus climate studies have existed for decades. While Rankin (2005) defines campus climate as "the cumulative attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential" (p. 17), others have focused simply upon individuals' perceptions and experiences of campus (Schrage & Giacomini, 2009). Muñoz and Murphy (2014) argued that, for minoritized student populations, campus climate can greatly impact student success and outcomes. Often, within the same samples, trans and nonbinary students' experiences are conflated with the experiences of students from minoritized sexual identities. LGBT students often report facing a chilly campus climate, marked by isolation, discrimination, harassment, violence and fear (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Brown et al., 2004; Dugan et al., 2012; Rankin et al., 2010). Furthermore, Tereault et al. (2013) found that LGBT students who are not out with their sexuality or gender identity and who face poor treatment from professors are at risk of not being retained. Beyond retention, LGBT students' perceptions of campus climate can directly affect their academic experiences and outcomes (Garvey et al., 2014; Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Woodford & Kulick, 2015), levels of involvement (Rankin et al., 2013), identity development (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Rankin et al., 2010), and overall health and wellness (Woodford et al., 2012). Thus, it is important to understand how trans and nonbinary students experience campus.

Academic Experiences

In a quantitative survey of more than 5,000 students, faculty, and staff, Garvey et al. (2014) found that trans-spectrum students had the most negative perceptions of their campuses, including campus climate, classroom climate, and curriculum inclusivity. The results of this study indicate that trans-spectrum students often face "cisgender-centric" classrooms which can inhibit their inclusion and learning. Using the same sample, Garvey and Rankin (2015) found

that students who identified as gender nonconforming held a significantly more negative perception of classroom climate than their gender conforming peers. Similarly, Woodford and Kulick, in their quantitative study at a single university in the Midwest, found that, if trans* students experienced a more negative climate and felt unable to disclose their identities, they became increasingly academically disengaged and, as a result, their GPA suffered.

Involvement

Just as students' academic experiences were affected by their perceptions of campus climate so are their levels of involvement. In a quantitative study of fraternity members who held minoritized sexual identities, Rankin et al. (2013) found that perceptions of climate and inclusion affected students' involvement. In older generations of fraternity members, negative perceptions caused them to feel less accepted and more hidden. However, younger respondents felt more comfortable and thus reported more satisfaction and enjoyment with fraternity activities. Furthermore, fraternity members who reported experiencing a positive climate were more likely to form close friendships within and beyond their fraternities and felt more comfortable participating in LGBT events outside of their fraternity.

Identity Development

Rankin et al. (2010), in a large-scale survey, found that LGBTQQ students who experience positive campus climate and classroom climates are more likely to have positive educational experiences and healthy identity development. Similarly, Garvey and Rankin (2015) found that gender nonconforming students' levels outness and comfortability on campus and their perceptions of the campus and classroom climates can affect their identity disclosure on campus, meaning if gender nonconforming students find campus to be welcoming, they are more

likely to share their identity with others around them. Nonconforming students were less likely to disclose their identities to fears of mistreatment. Furthermore, Garvey and Rankin (2015) found that LGBTQ students may internalize negative comments, hindering their overall identity development.

Health and Wellness

In their quantitative study on how campus experiences affect health outcomes related to drug and alcohol abuse, Woodford, Krentzman, and Gattis (2013) surveyed nearly 2500 college students. Among their findings is that LGBT students are more likely to witness or experience hostility. Furthermore, within their study, witnessing or experiencing hostility was associated with greater likelihood of problematic alcohol consumption. Similarly, Dunbar et al. (2017), in a large-scale survey of more than 33,000 college students in California, found that LGBT students are more likely to report facing higher rates of psychological distress or academic impairment due to mental health concerns. Moreover, LGBT college students in this survey often reported facing obstacles to receiving help on campus, such as the embarrassment of using such services or facing non-affirming environments. Such institutional barriers were found in previous research, as well (Beemyn, 2005).

Overall, campus climate is shown to have various effects upon outcomes for LGBT students, including effects upon their academic experiences, involvement, identity development, and health and wellness. Though this study was not specifically a campus climate study, the findings related to nonbinary students experiences with exploring gender expression at research institutions in the South can inform higher education educators and administrators and lead to an overall more welcoming environment for nonbinary college students, which could have potentially positive effects upon various educational outcomes.

Importance of Space

In a qualitative, narrative inquiry study, Flint et al. (2019) examined the experiences of nonbinary college students using a critical spatial lens. Their study was focused upon how nonbinary and agender students navigate their respective campuses, describe such navigations, and what, if any "modulations and nuances," affect nonbinary students' navigations (p. 438). The authors' study included five students who all identified as nonbinary (genderqueer, agender, and genderfluid) at a single university in the Southeastern region of the United States. Participants were asked to identify and narrate their usual paths, as well as spaces of comfort and belonging on campus. Flint et al., (2019) found threefold narratives: relationality, multiplicity, and constructing identity.

Relationality narratives focused upon not only physical space, but also "bodies and materialities" that allowed participants to feel connected on campus (Flint et al., 2019, p. 444). For example, participants noted the importance of the campus LGBTQ+ center as a place where they could comfortably be themselves. Even students who did not often visit the campus center felt reassurance simply by its presence on campus.

Multiplicity narratives dealt with the often-contradicting narratives of campus spaces (Flint et al., 2019). For example, one participant noted how they built a friendly relationship with a campus officer through the LGBTQ+ center; however, outside of the center, the student still chose not to call the campus officers when being harassed in other campus spaces for fear of mistreatment. So, while the LGBTQ+ center helped foster a positive relationship within the walls of its space, outside of those walls, the relationship did not carry through. Multiplicity narratives also played out in the ways participants reported moving across campus. For example, one participant noted feeling safe while navigating campus; however, in probing further, the authors

found that the student still chose paths that were visible, comfortable, safe, and "blend in with the crowd" (Flint et al., 2019, p. 448).

Constructing identity narratives were focused upon how students negotiated their gender identity between "internal conceptions of self and external spaces, environments, and forces" (Flint et al., 2019, p. 450). For example, participants noted that, despite their internal desires for alignment between their internal and external selves, openly expressing themselves as nonbinary on campus could potentially have some dangerous repercussions (Flint, Kilgo, & Bennet, 2019).

The authors urge that spaces on university campuses should be reimagined to consider the various, intersecting narratives within their findings. Nonbinary students did not "experience a linear, flat space of campus, but a dynamic assemblage of interactions between materials, environments, and bodies" (Flint et al., 2019, p. 450). Their findings speak to the need of creating affirming campus spaces that offer both connection and comfort for nonbinary students. Furthermore, their findings show the necessity to think beyond a binary identity in constructing higher education research.

Flint et al.'s (2019) study of nonbinary students navigating campus was extremely valuable to the conception and implementation of my study. The study explicitly examined nonbinary students' navigations of campus and the importance of affirming campus spaces and people. My study was directly influenced by the authors' findings. For example, Flint et al.'s (2019) study occurred at a Southeastern institution and found that nonbinary students could face dangerous repercussions for openly expressing their identities. This finding is not only informative but also had ripples upon my studies' protocol, as I had to consider my own participants comfortability and safety when it came to using photovoice methods. Furthermore, their findings helped guide interview protocols to not only understand how my participants

viewed safety on campus but also how attending a research institution in the Southern U.S. may have affected their experiences.

Summary of Nonbinary Students' Experiences

At best, the research on nonbinary college students is sparse—at worst, it is nonexistent. Beyond, and likely partially due to the difficulty in quantifying nonbinary students on college campuses, we do not have an accurate depiction of nonbinary college students' experiences. The existing research about nonbinary college students tends to conflate their experiences with college students with minoritized sexual identities. Furthermore, as mentioned above, many nonbinary individuals feel uncomfortable being labeled as or using the label trans, so it is increasingly likely that their experiences are different from their trans peers. However, at present, our best guess as to what their experiences may be are dependent upon research into trans and sexuality-based campus climate studies. Unfortunately, such studies paint a chilly portrait of campus for minoritized students, wrought with feelings of uncomfortably and exclusion, producing negative outcomes across student life. A foundational piece of higher education literature focused upon nonbinary college students' experiences comes from Flint, et al. (2019). Their study shows the importance of affirming spaces on campuses and begin to show how nonbinary students make sense of navigating their campus. Ultimately, this section highlights the current gap in nonbinary student-focused higher education research. As such, my dissertation fits into this gap by building upon the foundation laid by Flint et al. (2019) and adds to existing literature.

Gender Expression

According to the American Psychological Association (2015), gender expression refers to the ways an individual presents their gender identity through both physical appearance and

actions. The literature in this section provides a look at how gender expression has been studied in educational contexts. Though much of the literature written about gender expression is framed within K-12 education, the findings of the studies in the subsequent sections show how gender expression is policed and enforced through both institutionalized and socialized manners. This adds to the current study by showing the need for understanding how gender expression is policed in higher education contexts and how nonbinary students navigate these contexts. Historically, appearance has been a signifier of one's social class, role, or status; however, contemporarily, physical appearance has become central to defining personal identity (Negrin, 2008). In fact, Negrin (2008) argued that, in modern times, "the self is defined primarily in aesthetic terms—that is, in terms of how one looks rather than in terms of what one does" (p. 9). Appearance has become a personalized project that is both a performative management of impressions (Featherstone, 1991) and a self-reflective projection of one's personal identity (Giddens, 1991). This is echoed by Entwistle (2000) who, writing about fashion, argued that appearance is a system by and through which people adorn their bodies, performing and displaying subtle messages about who they are as individuals. Furthermore, just as gender identity is fluid, not fixed (Butler, 1990; Nicolazzo, 2017), appearance is also "completely malleable, able to be altered at will" in congruence with one's identity (Negrin, 2008, p. 14). For example, though appearance used to be heavily dictated by social expectations surrounding gender, such distinctions by gender have shrunk, as what was once unacceptable by social standards is now acceptable (Negrin, 2008).

Finkelstein (1991) argued that though people are conscious of the malleable nature of appearance, physical appearance is, more than ever, seen as an indicator of character. Crane (2000) wrote that understanding one's appearance within the context of their environment leads

to a greater understanding of the person. Thus, we circle back to Featherstone's (1991) idea of managing expectations. In the following section, I examined literature around gender expression, with special attention on the notion of passing.

Many studies have examined gender expression as related to sexuality in K-12 educational contexts and among queer adult populations. For example, in the 2017 School Climate Survey focused upon K-12 students, Kosciw et al. (2018) found, LGBQ cisgender students reported experiencing discrimination and stigmatization because of their gender expression more often than their non-LGBQ peers—especially when they were viewed as wearing clothing inappropriate for their gender. Further studies have examined the gender expression of adults from minoritized sexualities. For example, in a qualitative study, Ocampo (2012) found that gay men in the study often struggled with finding a balance between masculine and feminine appearance and managing others' expectations and reactions to them based upon appearance. Similarly, Reddy-Best and Pederson (2015), in a qualitative study of lesbian women, found that participants' appearance was often mediated by environmental contexts. Women would usually appear more feminine while at work, but more masculine or queer when at home or with their friend groups. Clarke and Smith (2015), in their qualitative study of gay men, found that their participants often did not wish to appear "too gay" (p. 25), as they were aware of potential negative, and possibly violent, repercussions of appearing gay. In each of these studies, gender expression seemed to be dictated by three things: individuals' desires or preferences for expression, managing expectations and reactions of others, and environmental contexts.

While researchers have studied gender expression through the lenses of sexuality and K-12 education, few have considered the experiences of nonbinary individuals and even fewer within a higher education context. In the following sections, I will consider the limited existing

research about gender expression within higher education and nonbinary gender expression. To end, I will discuss Nicolazzo's (2017) framing of passing in relation to her ethnographic study on trans* students in higher education.

Gender Expression in Higher Education

Nearly one-third of college students have reported being harassed for not conforming to either traditionally masculine or feminine gender roles and expression (Ash, 2007). Despite this, research related to gender expression of college students is sparse. Beyond the work of Ash (2007), additional studies have focused upon perceptions of others' gender expressions in college. In a quantitative study of 328 college students, Sweeney (2015) found that both age and personal perceptions of masculinity and femininity significantly influenced college students gender expression. Though this study was solely focused upon cisgender college students, it is important to note its implications. For example, older students in the sample were more likely to exclusively identify as either masculine or feminine in a way that matched their gender identity, while the youngest students were more likely to identify as both masculine and feminine.

Additional studies have examined others' perceptions of gender expression on college campuses. For example, in a qualitative study, Blair et al. (2017) examined science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) faculty members' observations of their responsibilities to promote gender inclusivity based on their perceptions of their students' gender expression in the classroom. Ultimately, STEM faculty used three discourses to construct student gender expression, which are gender blindness, gender acknowledgement, and gender intervention. Overall, faculty in the study felt that simply acknowledging the various gender expressions in their classrooms was enough which ultimately lessened their feelings of responsibility to promote gender equity in their classrooms in inclusive manners.

Ultimately, research on gender expression in higher education also tends to be focused upon a binary system of gender. For example, in their exploratory study of white, gay, college men, Anderson-Martinez and Vianden (2014) found that the participants in their study often adapted their expression to various campus environments. Furthermore, these students would often hide or cover their gender expression to avoid harassment, physical harm, and discrimination. The literature reviewed in these sections not only paints a chilly picture of campus climate for queer students, but also is an example of how higher education reinforces the gender binary. Overall, this demonstrates the need for welcoming spaces within higher education institutions for nonbinary students to express their gender in ways that are affirming.

Nonbinary Expression

Research solely examining nonbinary gender expression is severely limited. To my knowledge, no studies focus upon the gender expression of nonbinary individuals; instead, the research on nonbinary expression tends to focus upon others' perceptions of nonbinary individuals' gender expressions. For example, in a quantitative study, Lopez (2018) examined how various generations of Mexican Americans view the gender expression of nonbinary individuals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, older generations and those with more "traditional" views of gender and gender expression, held negative feelings and biases towards individuals who express a nonbinary gender through their appearance and actions. Third and fourth generation Mexican Americans in the study had the most expansive views of gender identity and gender expression.

In multiple quantitative studies with more than 900 respondents, Broussard and Warner (2018) found that respondents felt most threatened by individuals who express their gender in nonconforming or nonbinary ways. While respondents also felt threatened by trans individuals who expressed their trans identities in conforming ways, their levels of discomfort were greater

for those who were nonconforming. The authors stipulated that passing trans individuals were also found by participants to be "threatening to gender essentialist beliefs" (Broussard & Warner, 2018, p. 426). Overall, the authors study showed that nonconforming individuals are viewed more negatively than trans individuals, though passing was also seen as a threat.

Passing and Covering

Goffman (1963) described passing as a way that social identities are "nicely invisible and known only to the person who possesses it" (p. 73). Passing is used in context to numerous minoritized social identities, including race (Gross, 1998), class (Foster, 2005; Moriel, 2005), sexuality (McCune, 2014), and gender (Halberstam, 2001; Nicolazzo, 2017; Squires & Brouwer, 2002). Referring specifically to trans experiences, the APA (2015) defined passing as "the ability to blend in with cisgender people without being recognized as transgender based on appearance or gender role and expression" (p. 862). Nicolazzo (2017) framed passing as a way to be "socially (mis)read as having a particular gender identity" (p. 168). Related to passing is the notion of covering, which Yoshino (2006) described as the act of hiding one's stigmatized social identity. As Nicolazzo (2017) argued, trans* people are intimately familiar with the concepts of passing and covering, and that they often feel compelled to cover or pass for fear of their own safety. Furthermore, Nicolazzo (2017) argued that passing and covering are both contextually and environmentally driven.

Little research examines passing and covering using a higher education lens. However, in Nicolazzo's (2017) ethnographic qualitative study of trans* collegians, participants often reflected on their own experiences with passing and covering. Often, participants noted feeling as if part of their identity was erased. For example, Kade, a trans* man, shared that he often was perceived as cisgender and straight, while Megan, a trans* woman, when she did not feel

comfortable expressing her trans* identity, was often perceived as a gay man. Both participants, through their experiences passing and covering, felt that their trans* identities were invisible. Micah, a student who identified as comfortable, genderqueer, reflected as being read as a girl who dresses in boys' clothing, and thus as a lesbian. Once again, rendering this student's identity invisible by their peers.

The participants' experiences from Nicolazzo's (2017) study highlight the dichotomy of passing and covering. Though some may attempt to pass or cover due to safety reasons (Billard, 2019; Leary, 1999; Nicolazzo, 2017), passing and covering are also oppressive, in that they are built upon the "social privileging of some identities … over others" (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 36). This led Nicolazzo (2017) to expand upon work by Rich (1980) and Butler (1990) and coin the term *compulsory heterogenderism*, which states that though trans individuals' sexualities are different and distinct from their gender identities, nontrans individuals often make sense of trans through a lens of sexuality-based misconceptions. Compulsory heterogenderism on campus is likely an undercurrent at the intersection of gender identity development and gender expression for nonbinary college students.

Summary of Gender Expression

Appearance is a mean through which people express various aspects of their identity, including their gender. The above studies demonstrate the importance of context and environment upon gender expression. While gender expression has been examined as a product of or influence on individuals' sexual identities and often within K-12 educational contexts, it has less so been examined as a part of a nonbinary expression or within higher education. The review above shows that there is room for attention to how nonbinary college students express their gender in relation to higher education contexts.

Summary

This chapter served to outline relevant literature around nonbinary college students. To open, I reviewed terminology associated with queer identities, followed by discourse on trans identity development. Then, I synthesized literature that examined the experiences of nonbinary college students, gender expression, and ended this chapter by looking at the historical treatment of queer students. This chapter highlights the need for further studies on nonbinary students' experiences, specifically surrounding their exploration of gender expression at research institutions in the South.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

In planning research, one of the most important considerations is that "research type should align with the research problem, purpose, and questions" (Biddix, 2018, p. 53). What this means is the research question should guide the methods and designs employed. The purpose of this study is to understand how nonbinary college students in the Southern United States experience exploring and expressing their gender identity while enrolled at research institutions. To better understand this phenomenon, I seek to explore the following research question:

1. What are the experiences of nonbinary college students in the Southern United States in exploring their gender expression at research universities?

This chapter begins with a brief overview of qualitative research and the selections of both narrative inquiry and photovoice in relation to the proposed study. Then, I will discuss the specific methods used for data collection and data analysis. I will outline measures of trustworthiness for the proposed study, including my own relation and proximity to the proposed topic. Finally, this chapter will end with delimitations of the study.

Qualitative Research

According to Biddix (2018), qualitative research "seeks to explore and represent reality as it exists in context and to enlighten the ways in which individuals experience that reality" (p. 76). Qualitative research is, by nature, guided by a constructivist perspective, which "seeks to understand reality from individual interpretations" (Biddix, 2018, p. 76). Qualitative research is also referred to as having emergent design, meaning the process may be changed throughout the study as new data is gathered and informs the study (Cresswell, 2014). Multiple sources of data are considered within qualitative research, rather than relying on a sole source of data (Cresswell, 2014); thus, I used elements of both narrative inquiry and photovoice to understand how

nonbinary college students in the Southern United States experience exploring and expressing their gender identity while enrolled at research institutions.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is rooted in the notion that, through sharing stories, participants form their experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Wang & Geale, 2015). These stories and experiences are shaped by individuals' unique experiences (Riessman, 1993). When stories are shared, they may be changed by the moment, how those who experienced the moment felt, how the listener is experiences the story, among other influences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which speaks toward the importance of the role of the researcher, which is discussed in subsequent sections. Narrative inquiry gives the storyteller a chance to represent a series of experiences and convey a particular meaning attached to those stories (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry uniquely puts value on shared stories and the lived experiences of individuals. Rather than seeking one universal truth, narrative inquiry "reveals the meanings of individuals' experiences" (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 196).

An important aspect of narrative inquiry is the relationship between the researcher and the participants. In narrative inquiry, the researcher and the participants, "constantly negotiate the meaning of the stories" that are shared throughout the research process (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 196). It is part of the role of the researcher to review the stories that are shared with the participants through continual reflection on the meanings described through the stories (Wang & Geale, 2015). Narrative inquiry allows for researchers to have an insider view of the phenomenon in question, which allows for enhanced understanding and deeper perspective (Wang & Geale, 2015). As such, an important part of narrative inquiry is building positive

relationships between the researcher and the participants. In this study, I did this through the protocol as well as through honoring the participants time and energy in taking part in my study.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) described three common approaches to narrative inquiry, which are biographical, psychological, and linguistic. Within these approaches, biographical refers to analyzing the story through various lenses of the importance the participants place on gender, race, family of origin, life events, turning points, and other persons. The psychological approach refers to a participants' thoughts and motivations. Finally, the linguistic approach, other times referred to as discourse analysis (Gee, 2014), is focused upon the language of the story, including the participant's intonation, pitch, and pauses. While all three approaches of narrative inquiry are important, my study and analysis focused upon the biographical and psychological approaches. Data analysis was primarily driven by understanding the biographical and psychological aspects of participants' stories.

The use of narrative inquiry in this study was to collaboratively explore nonbinary college students' experiences surrounding gender expression at research universities in the South. Furthermore, using a narrative approach allowed, through participatory research, to understand larger impacts on the present and ways to shape the future. Narrative inquiry's focus on individuals was appropriate for the current study as this study was built upon the assumption that gender and gender expression are performative and fluid. While there were similarities across participants' stories around navigating and exploring gender expression on college campuses, no two stories were the same.

Narrative Inquiry in Higher Education Research

Narrative inquiry has been used by researchers to understand the experiences of queer college students and faculty. For example, Miller, Nachman, and Wynn (2020) used narrative

research to understand how autistic and LGBTQ college students navigated higher education. Among their findings were that students prioritized their salient identities based upon their context, they managed the visibility of their identities, and they faced challenges when participating in LGBTQ and autistic communities. Although this study was focused upon the intersections of autistic and queer identities, the findings can be applied to the proposed study and show the importance of space and context for queer students, while also demonstrating the potential difficulty in managing expression or participation in various campus spaces. In a narrative inquiry study of trans faculty, Pitcher (2020), along with their participants, developed five tenets to reconceptualize gender equity at higher education institutions: conceptualizing gender as multifaceted, the mutual constitution of social identities with multiplicative effects, centrality of trans individuals naming the conditions of their oppression, the salience of multiple systems of oppression within participants' experiences, and the importance of resisting dominant norms to improve workplace conditions for trans faculty. Though this study was focused upon trans faculty, the tenets and findings can be applied to the experiences of nonbinary college students as such applications can have ripples on the larger campus climate for gender expansive students.

Using a critical special lens and narrative inquiry, Flint et al. (2019) explored how nonbinary students navigate their campus, a large, public university in the Southeastern U.S. Their findings consistently pointed towards the importance of various campus spaces. For example, students often sought to “blend in with the crowd” (p. 448) when moving between campus spaces. Another finding demonstrated how students constructed identity in related to context. Constructing identity narratives were focused upon how students negotiated their gender identity between “internal conceptions of self and external spaces, environments, and forces”

(Flint et al., 2019, p. 450). Their findings speak to the need of creating affirming campus spaces that offer both connection and comfort for nonbinary students. Participants in their study often affirmed the need to be strong and "committed to living your physical self" (p. 449) as the South can often be hostile for trans people. Furthermore, the authors' findings show the necessity to think beyond a binary identity in constructing higher education research.

Photovoice

In addition to using narrative inquiry as a guiding method, this study was also grounded in photovoice. In photovoice research, participants are prompted to take photographs of places or moments that fit within certain initial themes; then, through discussion and participation, themes are derived from the photographs. Photovoice was originally termed *photo novella* by researchers Wang and Burris in the mid-1990s and was used to document and assess women's health in rural China (Latz, 2017). *Photo novella* provided rich context to the study through both the photograph and the contextual story that accompanied it. According to Latz (2017), photovoice is a form of participatory research that includes participants as both participants and researchers, as participants are "actively interwoven into the research process" (p. 3). This type of participatory action research allows for shared ownership of research, community-oriented understandings of social problems, and a propensity for community action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). A strength of photovoice is the ability to remain flexible throughout the process, as the documentation and narration of participant photos may lead to further insights or inspire further questions regarding the photo context (Latz, 2017).

Photovoice was appropriate for this study because it has often been used to "highlight the experiences and perspectives of those who have been marginalized, those with voices not ordinarily heard by those in positions of power" (Latz, 2017, p. 3). Furthermore, as Maguire

(1987) argued, participatory research, such as photovoice, allows researchers to practice solidarity with those who have been historically marginalized. My study sought to understand how nonbinary college students in the Southern United States experience exploring and expressing their gender identity while enrolled at research institutions. The use of photovoice built upon narrative inquiry by allowing further insight into campus contexts and spaces, as well as gender expressions of participants. To understand how nonbinary college students experience exploring their gender expression and identity, it is important to understand various temporal campus spaces and how they contribute to nonbinary students' experiences. This insight into nonbinary college students' experiences provided richer contexts and visual descriptions of both participants' spaces and themselves.

Photovoice in Higher Education Research

Researchers have employed photovoice when working with queer college students. For example, Bardhoshi et al. (2018) used photovoice when examining the experiences of LGBTQ students at a Midwest university, asking queer students to "take pictures that held personal meaning related to being an LGBTQ student on campus" (p. 199). Following periods of photography, the researchers hosted and recorded focus groups to discuss the photographs with participants. Among their findings were that students practiced self-censorship but also identified with various safe, advocacy zones on their college campuses. Photovoice has also been used to explore campus belonging for queer students of color. Means (2017) employed photovoice to examine the experiences of Black LGBTQ college students at three predominantly White institutions in the Southeasern U.S. Means (2017), after an initial interview, asked participants to take 10-12 photographs that "reflected their spiritual journey and spaces" (p. 234). Following this, Means (2017) conducted field observations at the spaces the participants identified as

important. Findings indicated that Black LGBTQ college students often faced oppression while on spiritual journeys and within spiritual spaces. However, these students were able to challenge this oppression through developing relationships with a higher power and creating spiritual counterpaces. In another study, Duran (2019), following a first round interview, asked queer students of color at a predominantly White institution in the Midwest to photograph spaces where they "experience belonging" (p. 156) allowing participants to use their own perspectives to share their experiences. The photos were then used to inform secondary interviews to understand students' experiences. Duran (2019) found that participants defined belonging as having their multiple identities validated, connecting to individuals with similar goals, and having smaller networks of similar collegians. The findings from these studies echo the findings within similar narrative inquiry studies that show the importance of managing identify as well as the importance of spaces within college campuses for queer college students.

Framework

As well as being informed by previous literature surrounding nonbinary students' experiences and research employing the methods of narrative inquiry and photovoice, this study is framed by both critical queer theory and Bilodeau's (2007) conception of genderism. Critical queer theory and genderism informed every aspect of this study, from how it was conceived to how data was analyzed.

Critical Queer Theory

This study was framed within a critical queer framework as well as through genderism. Queer theory emerged as a critical framework in the 1990s. It is built upon challenging heteronormativity and assumptions about normality (Abes, 2007). Queer theory also moves beyond gender and sexuality binary and suspends direct classifications of identity such as

"lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," "masculine," and "feminine" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). This suspension is based upon the principle that identity is not fixed, but rather performed and unstable (Butler, 1991) as well as fluid (Fuss, 1989). Queer theory also considers intersecting identities as well as systems of power and oppression that "privilege some and silences others" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 65).

Queer theory was used throughout the entire research process and informed interview protocols and Photovoice prompts. Queer theory's critiques of heteronormativity and perceived normality guided me to seek out information from participants in their own words and without preconceived labeling of identity. Furthermore, when considering interview protocols, I purposefully avoided assigning labels or value to aspects of gender expression that are often subject to stereotypes, such as "masculine" and "feminine." While participants often used and spoke about their identity and expression through these labels, I used that as an opportunity to ask further questions about what such descriptors meant to them. I did not define these terms as a researcher, but rather allowed my participants to share and conceive of their own descriptions of their expression.

Genderism

Genderism is "the belief of assumption that there are two, and only two genders" (Bilodeau, 2007, p. 71). According to Lev (2005), genderism also associates biological sex to an ideal appropriate gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. As Bilodeau (2007) wrote, "norms in college environments created standards and accountability for being seen as male or female" (p. 72), which can perpetuate genderism and maintain it on a systematic level. Furthermore, genderism is enacted and maintained at a systemic level through "implicit and

explicit laws, rules, and policies" (Bilodeau, 2007, p. 72). Bilodeau (2009) found four characteristics of power and oppression of genderism on college campuses:

> (1) There was a forced social labeling process that sorts and categorizes all individuals into male or female identities, often at an institutionalized level. (2) There was social accountability for conforming to binary gender norms with related punishments. Individuals who failed to conform were viewed as deviant and/or having a disorder. (3) Marginalization was enacted through an overt and covert privileging of binary systems. (4) Binary systems promoted invisibility of gender non-conforming identities and isolation of transgender persons, making transgender identities inaccessible. (pp. 72-73)

Bilodeau's (2007) participants revealed that genderism impacted their campuses experiences in nearly all aspects, including academics, employment and career aspirations, participation in queer organizations and communities, and campus facilities. Participants also shared that the influence of genderism on campus was "inescapable" (p. 132). Furthermore, according to Bilodeau (2007), "fluid gender identities, operating in a non-categorical manner, undermine the very nature of the binary gender model" (p. 132). Understanding the permeative nature of genderism was important to this study, as it effected all aspects of nonbinary students' campus lives. Nonbinary students' experiences with genderism informed how they explored and experienced gender expression on college campuses.

Genderism also informed the entire proposed research process, from creating interview protocols, to learning with and through participants, and interpreting data. Specifically, genderism's reliance upon fixed ideals of appropriate gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (Lev, 2005) allowed me to probe further into understanding the experiences of nonbinary participants. Participants' experiences spoke to larger, systematic maintenance and

propagation of genderism. Applying the idea "implicit and explicit laws, rules, and policies" (Bilodeau, 2007, p. 72) helped me as a researcher to understand the experiences of nonbinary students and when to probe further during interview processes.

Data Collection

In this section, I discuss the various approaches to data collection used within the study. Data collection took many forms and began after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas.

Participants

The sample for the current study was drawn from a population of college students who self-identified as nonbinary and who are currently enrolled, full-time at research universities in the Southern United States. Participants were not limited to academic disciplines or ranks and included both graduate and undergraduate students. Participants were asked to fill out a short, demographic questionnaire to understand various roles, identities, and majors they held. Furthermore, to protect students' identities and confidentiality, participants self-selected pseudonyms to be associated with their data. In total, 15 participants each took part in a single interview, averaging approximately 75 minutes. Of these, 7 participants selected to also take part in the Photovoice portion of the study. For safety and comfortability, participants could self-select to participate in taking photos of their campus spaces. Nine participants were undergraduate students, three were master's students and three were doctoral students. Participants' majors ranged from fine arts to STEM. Table 1 provides a brief overview of participants. In addition, brief participants profiles are also included below.

Table 1

Participants

Name	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Race	Major, Degree and Year	State
Ariel	Agender/nonbinary	He/She/They	Latino	English, bachelor's, 3rd year	Texas
Azélie Kent	Nonbinary	They/Them	White	Advertising, master's, 2nd year	Texas
Bloo	Nonbinary	They/Them	White/Jewish	Evolution, ecology, behavior, Ph.D., 1st year	Texas
Buie	Nonbinary	She/Her, He/Him	White	Coastal and marine systems sciences, master's student	South Carolina
Charlie	Nonbinary	They/Them	White	Counseling, master's student, 2nd year	Arkansas
Dabi	Nonbinary	Any, They/Them preferred	Pacific Islander	Undecided, bachelor's, 3rd year	North Carolina
Fae	Nonbinary	Sher/Her and They/Them	Caucasian	Psychology, bachelor's, 3rd year	Mississippi
Green	Nonbinary	They/She	White	Nursing, Ph.D., 1st year	Alabama
Harper	Nonbinary	They/Them	White	Landscape architecture, bachelor's, 3rd year	Arkansas
Link	Nonbinary	They/Them/Theirs	White	Higher education, Ph.D., 2nd year	Texas
Nolan	Nonbinary	They/Them	White	Psychology, bachelor's, 3rd year	North Carolina
Phoenix	Nonbinary	They/Them	White	English and theatre, bachelor's, senior	North Carolina
Ren	Nonbinary, transmasculine	He/Him, They/Them	Asian	Business analytics and information systems, bachelor's, 2nd year	Florida
Tack	Genderqueer	He/Him, She/Her, They/Them	White	Animation, bachelor's, 1st year	North Carolina
Tsuyan	Two-spirit	Fae/Faers, It/Its	Multiethnic	Illustration, bachelor's, senior	North Carolina

Participant Profiles

Below, there are brief, narrative profiles about each participant that discuss their background.

Ariel (He/She/They) identifies as agender, nonbinary, and Latino. He is an undergraduate in his third year studying English. The university Ariel attends is a large, public, 4-year, research institution with more than 50,000 students in Texas. Ariel lives on campus and is involved with both game design and artist student organizations. Ariel describes his typical gender expression as androgynous, and his favorite color is gray.

Azélie Kent (They/Them) identifies as nonbinary and White. They are a master's student studying advertising. The university Azélie Kent attends is a large public, 4-year, research institution with more than 50,000 students in Texas. Azélie lives off campus in a cooperative community and works as a teaching assistant. They also hold a second job as a bakery manager. Azélie describes their typical gender expression as a "50/50 shot of either getting the most feminine vintage aesthetic or just, 'Oh, that's a whole dude.'" Their favorite color is the red of a good red wine.

Bloo (They/Them) identifies as nonbinary, White, and Jewish. They are a Ph.D. student studying evolution, ecology, and behavior. The university Bloo attends is a large, public, 4-year, research institution with more than 50,000 students in Texas. Bloo is a member of the graduate student assembly representing their program. Bloo describes their gender expression as, "… t-shirt, shorts, kind of not giving a fuck what other people think." While they like all colors but pink, they say their favorite color is consistently green.

Buie (She/Her, He/Him) identifies as nonbinary and White. While she considers herself a part of the lesbian community, she does not identify as a woman. She is a master's student studying coastal and marine systems sciences. The university Buie attends is a medium-sized, public, 4-year, research institution with about 11,000 students in South Carolina. Buie works as an instructor for multiple lab courses for undergraduate students. She describes her gender expression as androgynous. Her favorite color is shades of brown: tan, earth tones, and rock tones.

Charlie (They/Them) identifies as nonbinary and White. They are a master's student studying counseling. Charlie attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 30,000 students in Arkansas. Charlie is involved on campus with both their program's graduate student organization and the university's representative body for graduate students. They describe their gender expression as a bit androgynous and masc-leaning. Their favorite color is maroon.

Dabi (Any pronouns, They/Them) identifies as nonbinary and as Pacific Islander. They are an undecided undergraduate student in their third year. Dabi attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 30,000 students in North Carolina. Dabi lives off campus but is involved with the Women and Gender Center, a campus book club, and the Theater Department. They describe their gender expression as androgynous. Dabi's favorite color is mustard yellow.

Fae (She/Her, They/Them) identifies as nonbinary and Caucasian. She transferred to her current university as a junior, undergraduate student studying psychology. She attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 23,000 students in Mississippi. Fae is involved with the queer student organization on campus. Fae describes her gender expression as "whatever sparks joy" and wanting to emulate David Bowie. Fae's favorite color is green.

Green (They/She) identifies as nonbinary and White. Green is a Ph.D. student studying nursing. Green attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 21,000 students in Alabama. They live off campus but are a board member for the queer student organization for graduate and professional students. Green describes their gender expression as having "visible queerness" but a bit more masculine. Their favorite color is green.

Harper (They/Them) identifies as nonbinary and White. Harper describes that having ADHD is also a large part of their identity. They are a junior, undergraduate student studying landscape architecture. Harper attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 30,000 students in Arkansas. Harper works on campus with a volunteer organization. They describe their gender expression as "coming off like a queer person" and "pretty masculine." Though Harper wears a lot of red, their favorite colors are shades of light blue.

Link (They/Them/Theirs) identifies as nonbinary and White. Link is a Ph.D. student studying higher education. The university Link attends is a large, public, 4-year, research institution with more than 50,000 students in Texas. Link is a graduate assistant with a gender and sexuality center on their campus as well as a research assistant in their program. Link describes their gender expression as "scattered" and "whatever I want." They said that they tend to look like "Elton John, Stevie Nicks, and Ke$ha" rolled into one. Links favorite colors are shades of blue.

Nolan (They/Them) identifies as nonbinary and White. They are a junior, undergraduate student studying psychology. Nolan attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 30,000 students in North Carolina. Nolan works as a bus driver on their campus and is very involved with their queer student center on campus. Nolan describes their gender expression as "more boyish." Their favorite color is purple.

Phoenix (They/Them) identifies as nonbinary and White. They are a senior, undergraduate student, double major studying English and theatre. Phoenix attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 30,000 students in North Carolina. They live on campus and are heavily involved with the theatre department, assisting with productions and prop design, as well as the campus' queer student center. Phoenix describes their gender identity as "genderful" and their gender expression as "eccentric professor" consisting of colorful ties and patterned shirts. While Phoenix likes all colors, such as red, purple, and pink, their favorite color is lime green or neon green.

Ren (He/Him, They/Them) identifies as nonbinary, transmasculine, and Filipino-American. He is a second year, undergraduate student studying business analytics and information systems. Ren attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with more than 43,000 students in Florida. He lives off campus and is involved with multiple Asian student groups and his campus' queer student organization. Ren describes his gender expression as fluid and changing presentations often. His favorite color is yellow.

Tack (He/Him, She/Her, They/Them) identifies as genderqueer and White. He is a first-year, undergraduate, fine arts student studying animation. Tack attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 30,000 students in North Carolina. Tack lives on campus in a living learning community for art students and is interested in joining the animation guild on campus. Tack doesn't know how to describe their gender expression because, "it's not masculine per se… half of my wardrobe is Hawaiian shirts." His favorite color is purple-ish or anything on the purple-indigo spectrum.

Tsyuan (Fae/Faers, It/Its) identifies as Two-spirit and multiethnic. Tsuyan is a senior, undergraduate student studying illustration with two minors in creative writing and linguistics.

Fae attends a large, public, 4-year, research institution with about 30,000 students in North Carolina. Tsuyan volunteers with the gender center on campus and is a member of two student organizations: an autism student alliance and an illustration guild. Fae also attends activism events on campus. Tsuyan describes faer gender expression as “more on the feminine side” and enjoys bold makeup. Fae likes all pallets of colors, but shared if fae had to find a favorite, it would be yellow.

Sampling Procedures

Initial recruitment occurred via institutional gatekeepers, by emailing students and staff involved with LGBTQ or gender-focused campus resource centers, when the information was publicly available. I used purposeful snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) which allowed participants to identify and recommend further participants who met the study criteria. Invitations to participate in the study were also shared via social media, campus newsletters, and ListServs when available.

Procedures

First, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas. After receiving approval, I began sampling from the broader population. Potential participants were screened using a demographic questionnaire to ensure that they met the qualifications of the selection criteria. I intended to interview a minimum of 10, self-identified, nonbinary college students at research universities in the Southern United States; however, I ultimately interviewed 15 total students. Data collection with participants took place across two phases: interviews and photovoice.

Participants were interviewed via Zoom or phone, depending upon the preference of the participant. During introductions of the interview, I ensured that participants understood the nature and scope of the study, that they completed and returned an informed consent form, and that they chose a pseudonym, which was used to help protect confidentiality. Interviews occurred in one, approximately 75-minute block. At the end of each interview, I shared photovoice procedures and prompts with the participants and allowed them to ask questions for clarification. Interviews were recorded electronically and later transcribed verbatim using the Scribie audio transcription service. I reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. Then, participants were given approximately two weeks to review the transcriptions and ensure accuracy. Participants were encouraged to add anything to their transcripts that may have occurred to them upon further reflection following the interviews. During this time, participants were also sent initial themes and codes with short descriptions and examples. They were given the opportunity to read and give initial feedback on the emergent themes and codes to ensure that they were relevant and encapsulated their experiences. Reminders about photovoice deadlines and reflections were sent to participants approximately one week after their initial interview. After receiving photos and reflections from participants, I included them in data analyzation procedures.

Interviews

From a practical perspective, I used a semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed students to share their own experiences related to the research questions. Furthermore, the use of this interview protocol allowed me to ask further probing or intensive, follow-up questions related to participants' experiences within the research questions and in conjunction with the proposed framework. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants depth in response that yielded rich, thick descriptions of their experiences (Cresswell, 2000). According to Wang

and Geale (2015), questions in narrative inquiry interviews should "help [researchers] interpret and experience the world of the participants rather than try to explain or predict that world" (p. 196). The questions in the interview protocol (included in Appendix A of this manuscript) were informed by this and were written to seek details of participants' lived experiences rather than explain them.

Photovoice

After interviews, participants were asked to take photographs surrounding specific themes. First, participants were asked to take and share a photograph of themselves. Second, participants were asked to photograph a place on campus that is important to them and their exploration of their gender expression. Though I started with two initial prompts for the photovoice phase of the study, additional themes for photographs arose through conversations and interviews (Latz, 2017). Participants had the freedom to share additional photographs they deemed as important, and they did so. Participants were asked to write short, reflective memos with each photograph to provide further context to the photo when necessary. Data from the reflections was included within data analysis procedures.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study will followed multiple phases in conjunction with the data collection methods. Data analysis of the narrative approach followed the seven-phase technique to narrative data analyzation as described by Fraser (2004), which are as follows:

1. Hearing the stories, experiencing each other's emotions;
2. Transcribing the material;
3. Interpreting individual transcripts;

4. Scanning across different domains of experience;
5. Linking "The Personal with the Political";
6. Looking for commonalities and differences among participants; and
7. Writing academic narratives about personal stories.

Fraser's (2004) seven phases outlined the necessary steps to take when analyzing narrative data. Furthermore, this process allowed me to not only reproduce and make meaning from individuals' narratives, but also to look for common themes across narratives. This design encouraged a constant comparative method of analysis, which is inductive in nature, using research questions to guide both common themes and coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While coding, I continuously reviewed the data to make connections and reach saturation. In selecting final codes, *in vivo* coding will be used to mirror the language used by participants when choosing names for codes and themes (Creswell, 2009). This process also lent itself to the second phase of data analyzation through photovoice.

In analyzing photovoice data, Wang and Burris (1997) offer a three-step process which includes selecting, contextualizing, and codifying the photographs in participation with study participants. Selecting allows for the photographs mostly aligned to the study prompts to be included in analyzation. Contextualizing allows participants to give voice to their photographs through discussions, writing, or storytelling. In this study, participants were asked to write brief, reflective memos regarding their submitted photographs. Finally, codifying allowed for me, as researcher, to find common issues, themes, or theories that arose from the photographs and their contexts.

Data gained through both narrative inquiry and photovoice and the subsequent emergent themes and codes provided rich, thick description to the experiences of nonbinary college

students exploring their gender expression. The use of both personal narratives from multiple students, as well as contextualized photographs, allowed for multiple sources of data and a clearer understanding of their experiences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, I employed memoing, peer debriefing, and member checking. During data analysis, I will wrote memos to debrief salient themes and make meaning of the data. Furthermore, Bhattacharya (2017) encouraged narrative researchers to journal to document "thoughts and hunches, build on ideas, and explore subjectivities" (p. 96). I also discussed my findings and memos with my advisor and committee. Multiple forms of data were used to lend trustworthiness to the study (Creswell, 2014). Participants were given their deidentified transcripts to check for clarity, continuity, and accuracy. They were given the opportunity to edit the transcripts to ensure that the data that they shared fully reflected their experiences. Participants were also given the opportunity to review initial themes and codes from both the narrative and photovoice analyses to provide any feedback or context to the themes and codes. Finally, I reflected on my own positionality as a form of reflexivity throughout the entire research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Positionality and Reflexivitiy

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument of the study, by which all data is interpreted (Cresswell, 2009; Rossman & Rollis, 2017). Thus, it is important to understand my own identities. As Rossman and Rollis (2017) argued, the role of the researcher is that of a learner, and that researchers are both active and interactive participants in their studies, meaning the knowledge they contribute is interpretive and potentially subject to bias as we cannot separate ourselves from our interpretations of information gleaned from research.

Throughout the research process, I intentionally examined how my experiences and identities shaped how I make sense of the data. As a gay man, I may have "insider status" (Roberts, 2013) with some of my participants; however, it is possible that my other salient identities of being White and cisgender potentially affected how I built trust and rapport with my participants. I acknowledged that participants may have varying levels of comfort discussing some of these topics with me candidly in a formal interview setting. My identity as a White, cisgender man means that I likely experienced less scrutiny of my dress/gender expression compared to many of the participants. Secondly, as a person from a privileged socioeconomic background, I must acknowledge the fact that I had access to change and adapt my wardrobe at various points in my life—for school, work, and play. As a gay man, I must also acknowledge how cultural expectation and biases played into my clothing choices. Though I mostly present in traditionally masculine ways through my gender expression, I have at times dressed in ways that would culturally be considered more androgynous or feminine such as multiple visible piercings, hair dyed unnatural colors, brightly colored clothing, and more.

My own assumptions are informed by my lived experiences and privileges afforded me through my identities. It is important to note that there is nothing I could do that would make me fully understand the experiences of participants from minoritized gender or racial identities and how they navigate higher education holding those identities. The mix of insider and outsider status likely impacted how I was viewed and how information was disclosed to me. I intentionally worked to build trust and rapport with my participants through constructing meaningful interviews, as to not waste their time, offering my sincere thanks for their participation, and focusing upon being ethical throughout the entirety of the process. I shared with the participants how their participation contributes to helping campuses better serve gender

nonconforming and gender nonbinary students, potentially contributing to a more positive campus climate, overall.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

There were several limitations, delimitations, and assumptions that affected how the study was performed and how data were collected and analyzed. Included below is a brief overview of the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions that affected this study.

Limitations

This study was limited by its focus upon Southern research institutions in the U.S. It is possible that the inclusion of other types of universities could have yield varied results. Furthermore, a limitation was the demographics of the participants. Many universities in the Southern U.S. do not enroll students from minoritized racial or ethnic groups in proportion to their college aged populations. For example, using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Ashkenas et al. (2017) found that Black students made up less than 15% of first-year students at flagship universities in Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina, while Black adults made up approximately one-third of the states' college-aged populations. While my participants held multiple racial and cultural identities, a majority of participants were White, which potentially limited how data is interpreted and used following this study.

Delimitations

A future study could expand the reach to include institutions both in and out of the Southern United States, as well as including non-research universities. Furthermore, I chose to limit my participant pool to students who identify as nonbinary (e.g., genderqueer, agender, androgynous, gender non-conforming, etc.). While gender expression can at times be closely

related to sexuality or sexual identity, I purposefully did not choose to limit the participant group to students who identified as having both a queer sexual identity (e.g.; gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, etc.) and cisgender (gender identity matches sex assigned at birth). It is important to note that though the intersection of having a queer sexual identity and queer gender identity could potentially change how interview data is interpreted for an individual, I was necessarily seeking college students who identify as both queer in their sexual identity and gender identity.

Assumptions

This study was informed by a few assumptions, most of which related directly to the theoretical framework proposed. In keeping with tenets of queer theory, I assumed that gender identity is indeed both performed and fluid, whereas it may change given a particular environment or a particular audience. Furthermore, informed by the literature, I assumed that campus environments will have both institutionalized and socialized rules around expression. These assumptions impacted the ways data was collected and analyzed; thus, it was important that they were recognized.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and procedures for the study at hand. The uses and justifications of both narrative inquiry and photovoice were also described. Data collection and analyzation pieces were outlined, in addition to methods employed to ensure trustworthiness of the study. This chapter ends with a few limitations, delimitations, and assumptions about the study.

CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS AND FINDINGS

From participants' stories, several themes emerged related to the central research question: What are the experiences of nonbinary college students in the Southern United States in exploring their gender expression at research universities? The five major themes were as follows: symbiotic relationship between identity and expression, queer community and kinship, written and unwritten dress codes, campus as contradictory, and the interconnectedness of gender expression with other salient identities. These themes shed light on the experiences of nonbinary college students and will be defined in detail in the subsequent sections.

Symbiotic Relationship Between Gender Identity and Gender Expression

A symbiotic relationship between gender identity and gender expression emerged as a major theme from participants' stories. Many participants shared that their gender identity and gender expression developed alongside one another, with neither developing independently. Participants shared that by thinking about or exploring one, they grew in their feeling and understanding of the other. And furthermore, participants often noted that rather than completely rejecting gender, they were exploring and embracing a more expansive definitions and possibilities of gender. Simultaneously, many participants shared that as they explored their gender, they often found themselves experimenting with expression that would transgress the gender binary.

Early Conceptions of Gender

Participants realized their nonbinary gender identities from a young age, even if at the time they did not have the words to describe what that meant. Ariel spoke about how they recognized gender as a social construct from an early age:

> I hear some people saying they couldn't tell the difference between men and woman, but I knew the difference, but I only thought of it as a biological difference. I never thought of it as a social difference. And so when I saw certain people acting certain ways, I thought... I was like, I didn't really get it, I was like, "Why would you like force yourself to act that way?"

Ariel was not alone in these feelings. Similarly, Charlie recalled, "So, I think as a kid I really loved the idea of being androgynous and folks not knowing if I was a boy or a girl, and that was a lot easier to get away with, as a kid." Both Ariel and Charlie felt and recognized a nonbinary gender identity from a young age.

For many participants, exploring their gender identity at a young age coincided with a need or wish to explore their gender expression or presentation. Often, this exploration was done in a way that transgressed prevailing gender norms. For example, Harper said, "I remember being a child and wishing that I could wear different clothes or experiment with makeup or sometimes just look different or just like... I haven't really ever been super in touch with the idea of being a man." Green echoed Harper's feelings, "Even when I was a kid, I used to fight with my parents about having to wear a dress to church, when I was in first grade, all the way back then. And I hated wearing tights and all that."

Participants also shared that their exploration of their gender expression was affected by how other perceived them based upon their phenotypical characteristics. For example, Phoenix reflected on this, saying:

> … at first when I was figuring it out, my urge would be, was to go on a more masculine direction just because that's contradicting what people would naturally assume about somebody with my body. And also just the restrictions of in order to feel more neutral, I

> would have to be more masculine to compensate for what my body looks like… And a lot of that is how other people perceive me…

Similarly, Link recognized the impact that the perceptions of others had on their exploration of gender identity and expression, saying, “I guess what first comes to mind when I'm thinking about impacts on my expression isn’t my gender identity, it’s other people’s perceptions of my body. And I think that that then helped me understand gender better.” For Link, their exploration of gender identity and expression was hindered by others’ perceptions of what a fat child should wear. They recalled:

> … as a child, or whatever, having people look at my body and being like, “Okay, well, you're like a fat child, and therefore, you have to do all of these things.” And so a lot of it has to do with both sexualizing and putting on these fat-phobic ideas onto a child…. when I was younger, how I would dress would be based off of the things that I would hear from other people, like, “Oh, you need to hide your body, and you need to dress like this. You can't wear this.”

As participants recalled, others’ perceptions of their bodies or ideas of how they should dress inhibited or affected their ability to explore their gender identity and expression.

Though many participants found ways to explore their gender expression, even in the face of others’ perceptions, this was not always met without resistance. For example, Ariel recalled:

> I just didn’t really like the kind of feminine things that were pushed on me, so I would often dress up in more masculine ways, and I think that might have upset some people... My mom would always tell me go change into something else. I never really got to

> explore that because it was kind of not really pushed on me and I was kind of more pushed to look prettier and look more appealing, and so I was like, "I don't really wanna."

Charlie experienced similar things from their family. Charlie remembered, "My family was really strict and traditional, so I had to work around that, but I hated wearing dresses, loved wearing pants and getting grabby all the time, and so I tried to lean into that as best I could." Similarly, Green also faced resistance from their parents. They recalled instances fighting with their parents about what to wear when leaving the home as a child.

Participants' stories revealed that, from a young age, they often recognized that their gender identity did not coincide with that which they were assigned at birth. Rather, they began exploring and developing their nonbinary gender identity through exploration of their gender expression. However, that expression was often affected by other people's perceptions and even, at times, resistance.

Genderfull Not Genderless

As participants shared, early gender expression exploration took place through transgressing expectations. However, as participants continued exploring their gender identity and gender expression, gender identity and expression often became more about embracing expansive definitions of gender and redefining ideas of masculinity and femininity. For example, Phoenix, while speaking on their gender identity and expression said:

> I think... I guess genderfull as opposed to genderless… now it feels a bit more like I am like a kid and I can be sort of like, "Oh, I like these and I like this too and I like, this is fun" and just kind of grabbing everything that I like from wherever and putting it together into a big hideous piece of candy statue or something like that, and just something that makes me feel happy or I guess authentic.

Tsuyan shared similar feelings, as it recalled:

> When I was younger, I was very, I tried to lean super masculine just ‘cause I couldn't exactly figure out what exactly my gender was, ‘cause I knew it wasn't like cis and the journey between that I discovered that I liked femininity, but not in a traditional cis-women way. When I think about my gender, I think of it in abstract terms that tie to femininity, but not quite woman.

Tsuyan later went on to say that moving away from rejecting “what feels wrong” and instead switching faer mindset to “I need to do what feels right,” fae were able to feel, “a lot better about my gender, gender expression, and how I should perform gender.” Buie echoed both Phoenix and Tsuyan saying:

> I was like, I wanna be masculine and I wanna reject that even though there are parts of it that I really like. And I think the realization of, I can embrace those feminine things without actually being a girl, and there's no expectation that comes with those. You can just express yourself however you like, and so I think being able to be comfortable with my gender identity and say, “No, I'm not a girl.” But that allowed me to more freely enjoy the kind of girly things that earlier I was kind of rejecting or trying not to express interest in.

For these participants, embracing more expansive definitions of gender led them to be more comfortable in their gender expression and identities.

Participants also noticed a difference in how they viewed gender when compared to their friends. Ren, when reflecting on their gender expression, recalled how they and their friends viewed masculinity and femininity differently because of their identity. Ren shared:

> What I see as like feminine, they might not see as very feminine or whatever they... Whatever I see as like, “Oh, this is like super, super girly.” They're like, “No, that’s normal.” Or vice versa. I know when my friends are like, “Oh my god, I cut my hair and it's so short.” I'm like, “It's not that short.” And they're like, “Not for you, because for you everything is considered game.”

Ren’s conception of gender identity and expression allowed them to think differently than their peers, which also affected how they chose to present.

Summary

Participants began thinking about their gender identities and expression from young ages. Furthermore, the two were not explored separately, but rather developed together and informed how participants felt about both. However, these explorations were often shifted by others’ perceptions of their bodies as well as reactions from people close to them, such as family. Finally, through exploring and embracing nonbinary identities, participants often noted how they shifted their thinking on gender and concepts such as masculinity and femininity.

Queer Community and Kinship

A second theme that emerged from participants was the importance of queer community and kinship. The importance of fellow queer people was evidenced in both people who participants felt were important to their development, as well as campus spaces where participants felt most affirmed in their gender expression exploration.

Important People

Throughout telling their stories, participants often reflected on how queer people, such as their friend groups were most important to them when exploring their gender expression. Queer

friends were often a source of comfort as well as people that participants could confide in. Reflecting on their friends, Charlie shared:

> I'm extraordinarily lucky to have so many queer friends, so many close queer friends that are willing to talk about their differing experiences with me ‘cause that’s absolutely changed the way that I think about myself. It’s given me a lot more room to explore things that I think I was just too, honestly, traumatized to give myself the space to do.

Dabi shared these feelings, and their experience illustrates how the increased presence of queer people can increase a student’s ability and comfort to explore gender identity and expression. When a friend came out as queer to Dabi, they finally felt they had someone to confide in. “I hadn’t realized they also felt this way … it was a lot easier to confide in them” after they came out, Dabi said.

Fae recalled an experience when meeting new queer friends that they felt more comfortable because the friends created a welcoming space by sharing their pronouns. Fae shared, “The first person I met who introduced themselves to me with their name and pronouns, I was just like, ‘Oh, we can do that? Okay, okay.’” Tsuyan also identified friends who openly identified as queer as important people important in faer exploration of gender identity and expression. These friends were “very instrumental in helping me get comfortable with my own gender… They have also helped me feel a lot more comfortable about being identified as non-binary.”

Several participants also mentioned that queer partners were incredibly important to their exploration of gender expression. For example, Nolan shared how one of their partners cuts their hair for them, which Nolan recognizes as a meaningful act. Nolan began dating this partner prior to coming out, but shared how this partner continued to “go with the flow as things have

changed" with their gender expression and identity. Nolan continued, "The fact that she was really supportive of going with the short hair and the masculine style and even being willing to cut it for me was really meaningful." Harper also shared the importance of their partner, saying that "they have been there for me the whole way and encouraged me to explore my identity and stuff." Green echoed these sentiments as well but shared that both they and their partner were able to bond over exploring their gender identities and expressions. Green shared that having a queer partner allowed more "flow to dynamics in our relationships" compared to a previous relationship where they dated someone who identified as a cisgender man.

Though queer friends and partners were the most important to participants' exploration of gender expression, some participants also identified queer people on campus, such as faculty members, as being important to their development. For example, Tack recalled hearing a graduate assistant who taught one of her art classes introduce themself as genderqueer. After hearing from the teaching assistant, Tack thought, "I finally found a term that works for me: genderqueer… He introduced himself that way, and I thought about it for a second; I'm like, 'Oh, that's what it is' or 'that's what feels best' I guess." Harper also found queer campus leaders to be an important part of their campus experience when it came to exploring gender expression and identity. Harper, who works in a community service and volunteer office on their campus, found the space to welcoming because, "a lot of the people who work here are queer."

Just as queer friends, partners, and visible queer campus leaders were important, participants often cited relationships made through queer organizations on campus as important to their exploration of gender identity and expression. Azélie recalled an experience coming out as nonbinary to an LGBTQ organization they were a part of. They shared that after texting the group chat about their identity, "it was honestly terrifying the volume of messages. Like I swear

to God, they were about ready to throw a party about it. They all just about lost their minds. It was hysterical to watch." Ariel also recalled the importance of the members of the Women and Gender Center on their campus. The center offered several discussion and support groups for queer people. Ariel, who had felt closeted for most of their life, shared how the people in this organization made them feel welcome, "and they just had a very nice personality, were very respectful, very open-minded and just made me feel very safe to be myself and very happy to be myself."

It is clear that, when considering who is important to them, participants most often shared that friends and romantic partners were important in their exploration of gender expression. However, seeing visible queer people on campus, such as faculty and peers in campus organizations, was also important.

Summary

Participants often shared importance of queer community and kinship in relation to exploring their gender identity and expression. This community was often found through friends and romantic partners; however, the importance of queer mentors, such as queer faculty and peers in campus organizations, was also evident in participants' stories. Finding queer community and kinship helped participants to feel more affirmed and supported in their explorations of gender identity and expression.

Contradictory Campus

A third theme that emerged from participants' stories was that campuses existed as both supportive and antagonistic spaces. Many participants found their campuses to be a type of refuge, a space where they could freely explore their nonbinary gender expression for the first

time. However, despite this feeling, many spaces on campuses were also found to be antagonistic or inhibitive to gender exploration.

Campus as a Refuge

Many participants identified their campus overall as a space to freely explore and express their nonbinary gender identity. This was most often true as campus existed as a space away from family. For example, Fae shared, "When I'm here on campus, I'm much more confident in just acting and wearing whatever I want. I still think about [my gender expression], but I don't think about it as much." This was in stark contrast to their experiences working off campus and at home. Fae recalled their experiences working at a bank off campus and their home life:

> I felt so anxious and out of place there. I was like, 'I'm a fraud. I'm a clown. I gotta put on my clown make-up every day and do a little dance.' And it's like that when I go back home, too.

Fae saw their campus as a refuge, a more comfortable space to explore gender expression. Harper shared similar experiences. Though they are out to their mother, Harper felt the need to remain closeted around most family members and saw campus as a place to explore a nonbinary gender identity. Harper spoke about their experiences working with a volunteer and community service department on their campus as an affirming space because of the welcoming and supportive staff, saying, "[The volunteer office] is the first official space that I've ever gone by 'Harper' and gone by the/them in an official capacity." To Harper, it was having supportive staff and coworkers that made a difference in their ability to explore their gender expression and identity on campus.

Charlie also expressed how campus served as a type of refuge from family pressures and ideals when it came to their gender expression:

> My family... The family I was born into is not safe in that way, and so I think trying to square how I'm able to present on a campus versus whenever I visit family has been really tough, and the more I'm able to exist as a visibly non-binary person in my campus life, my school life, the harder it is to go back to family and pretend like that's not something. I know I'm gonna have to deal with it eventually, but my family's a hot mess express. So, I'm trying to figure out how to do that safely.

Ariel, too, found campus a more comfortable place to be themself, "'cause my family is pretty Catholic, and so I know they're never gonna really come to terms with this… outside of [visiting relatives] I'm a lot more comfortable just being myself." They went on further to say that their gender expression, away from their family, is seen "pretty androgynously and sometimes I even wear clothes I had bought from the men's section." In contrast, Ariel saw campus, overall, as "a really nice environment for me." As Ariel, Charlie, Harper, and Fae shared, campus offered many participants a place to exist as more openly and visibly nonbinary, especially in contrast to their experiences with family.

Queer Affirming Campus Spaces

While most participants saw campus as a type of refuge to freely explore and express their nonbinary gender identities, there were some spaces that were more welcoming and affirming to participants who were exploring their gender expression. Nearly every participant shared that queer-specific places, or those that had queer-focused programming, as welcoming. Bloo shared, "I definitely feel most comfortable about [my gender expression] in queer or queer majority spaces." Fae shared their campus had a lounge on the top floor of one of the buildings

dedicated to LGBTQIA students. This was a space that Fae felt welcomed and comfortable in, and they often found themself there hanging out and studying. Fae even admitted surprise that their university "made an actual room that's a safe space," as "it's a university in the South." Many participants echoed what Fae shared—surprise and happiness when their universities had queer affirming spaces, as they did not expect universities in the South to do much, if anything, to support queer students. Green also cited a department focused on providing support to queer students as an important space on campus, as they offer educational resources on queer identities. Link also found a gender and sexuality center, where they worked as a graduate assistant, to be incredibly welcoming and affirming. Even when Link struggled with what it means to express their nonbinary gender in a professional setting, they found the center to be a welcoming place, "but with the underlying assumption of you're gonna come with, okay, maybe no nips out or something." As evidenced by participants' narratives, spaces designed to specifically support queer students provided them comfortable settings to be nonbinary, especially for campuses in the South.

Many participants, when photographing and reflecting on spaces that were important to them, included photos of spaces that included visible queer markers, such as pride and transgender flags. Green reflected on seeing various pride flags hung in a public, outdoor, campus space, saying, "The first year I was a student this event showed me that there was enough space on campus to explore different ways that I wanted to express myself." Dabi also reflected on a photo that included the front of the LGBT campus center, where pride flags were hung on the windows. Dabi reflected on these visible markers, "To me, it feels like one of the safest places on campus." Though seemingly simple and small, the act of having physical pride markers was important to students.

Antagonistic Spaces

Though most participants recognized campus or parts of campus as a refuge to explore gender expression, there were spaces on campus that participants recognized as hostile or antagonistic to them and their exploration of gender expression. Many of these spaces that were identified as outright hostile were spaces that tended to be grounded in gender binaries. For example, Fae spoke at length about how they avoid Fraternity houses on their campus. Fae recalled:

> I avoid [fraternity houses] at all costs. Anytime I see a group of... 'Cause here, we're like the party school, and there's a lot of Greek life. And the thing about Greek life down here, for some reason, it's very white, it's very straight. I don't know why, but it just is. And I don't feel safe around places that have that vibe, I suppose. I don't like that.

Fae was not alone in recognizing fraternity houses as hostile. Tack also identified fraternity houses and fraternity men as hostile, sharing, "I haven't gotten any snide comments yet [about my gender expression], outside of just frat boys making noises, you know frat boys."

In addition to fraternity houses, campus gyms were recognized as hostile campus spaces. Bloo shared:

> I guess a little bit the gym, because gyms are very, I don't know, they feel like a heteronormative space where it's just like, 'We're in here lifting, ooh,' sort of deal … I go there 'cause I exercise, it makes me feel better but at the same time, it's not really a comfortable place. I don't really linger there any longer than I need to.

Both spaces identified as hostile were most often cited as being rooted in gender binaries and heteronormative; however, they were not the only spaces that participants felt were hostile to their exploration of gender expression.

Additional spaces that participants found hostile were due to the actions of the people present in those spaces. Multiple participants recalled negative experiences that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe in various campus spaces. For example, Charlie recalled seeking medical care at the campus medical facility. They shared that they were, "more likely to dress in dresses" rather than their usual presentation as, "I'm terrified that I just won't be taken care of around here." Charlie continued that, though they like their personal care doctor:

> … they mis-gender me every time, and that sucks. And I've been thinking about having kids with my partner and trying to explore that with doctors, it has been super scary. And we've both gone into to doctors' offices and I've had to talk with my partner about not using non-binary 'cause it feels not safe here.

Charlie's experiences at the campus medical facility caused concern. Not only did they feel unsafe seeking care due to the nature of medical care being focused upon gender binaries, but also, they faced explicit misgendering and lack of care from medical professionals. These experiences made Charlie think they should hide their identity, which made them feel unsafe seeking medical care at the campus facility.

Spaces Dependent Upon Context

Though some spaces were identified as affirming and other antagonistic, there were some campus spaces that fell in between. These spaces tended to be dependent upon who was present in the space and included classrooms, outdoor spaces, and involvement spaces.

Classrooms

When thinking of classrooms, some participants shared positive experiences related to their exploration of gender expression while some participants shared negative experiences. When thinking of positive experiences, participants recalled taking courses from affirming faculty members. Tsuyan shared, "I have quite a few professors who I do feel safe and comfortable around" as they are informed on queer issues. These particular professors were in the film, linguistics, biology, and sociology departments. Similarly, Tack had mostly positive experiences with faculty members. They felt comfortable expressing their gender in the classroom as the professor demonstrated inclusive practice, such as "asking everybody what their pronouns were."

Though some participants identified classrooms as mostly positive spaces, others recognized classrooms as hostile spaces. In such instances, the experiences for students in the classroom was often dictated and directed by the faculty member, who had the power in shifting the culture within the classroom. For example, Ren shared that they "don't take it on myself to express that I am anything other than cis" because they are scared that faculty will not respect them as they are usually "absent-mindedly misgendering" them. Ariel similarly avoided expressing their nonbinary gender openly in classrooms because "a lot of my professors are old, and that I know not everyone is accepting of this kind of thing, and so I just don't wanna deal with possible harassment." Phoenix also identified a negative classroom experience as a source of frustration. In this instance, Phoenix's professor outright refused to use singular they pronouns as, "he thought that any time anyone uses singular they, regardless of whether it's right to a nonbinary person or not, that's grammatically incorrect, and people would be confused by that." Phoenix debated this professor and felt like they were having to teach him about pronouns as,

“he just didn’t seem to have a very good understanding about transgender people and nonbinary people and that sort of thing.” Unfortunately, as seen here, several participants found their classroom experiences to be outright hostile and negative.

Azélie shared having mixed experiences in classrooms. They serve as a teaching assistant for two courses taught by two different faculty. One faculty member conveyed “no pressure to dress in any particular way” as they would support Azélie’s expression. The other caused Azélie to “feel extremely pressured to conform to my gender at birth.” Azélie went further to say that the faculty member was “Not a good guy. He’s not good.” Link also had mixed experiences with classroom spaces. Though they mostly felt affirmed on campus, Link recognized that their gender expression did face hostility in the classroom. Link recalled receiving the Southern idiom that they referred to as “’Bless your heart’ kind of resistance” in response to their gender expression in the classroom.

Charlie also recognized mixed experiences. For example, in one class focused on human diversity, Charlie’s faculty member brought in a nonbinary person to talk about nonbinary gender identity and expression, which they found extremely helpful. However, another faculty member dismissed Charlie’s concerns about employment issues. Charlie, who was going into counseling, was worried about job prospects in the South as many counseling-related positions are funded by state governments. When Charlie brought these concerns up in class:

> My program director was like, ‘Oh, I hadn't even thought about that,’ I was like, ‘Oh, how could you not think about that?’ And I just felt like, I don't know, I don't even know how to describe how I felt, it just was kind of devastating to be like, ‘How could you not consider me, consider other people like me?’ We're not invisible, we're here, but just to have it like be a surprise was really strange.

As evidenced by participant's stories, classroom experiences are heavily reliant upon how informed and understanding faculty are of nonbinary students' experiences.

Outdoor Spaces

Just as many participants shared mixed experiences within classrooms, outdoor spaces could be affirming or antagonistic to nonbinary students' explorations of their gender expression. Similar to classroom experiences, experiences with outdoor spaces were often dependent on others. People present in outdoor spaces were able to dictate how the environment felt for nonbinary students.

Though most participants shared that queer-focused spaces were the most affirming, one participant shared a unique location as an important place to them. Both in photographs and interviews, Bloo often spoke about a turtle pond on campus. In reflecting on this outdoor space, Bloo shared:

> This is gonna sound kind of silly, but there's a turtle pond on campus… There are so many turtles there and I think it's kind of my on-campus happy space right now and 'cause I love turtles and animals make me really, really happy and make me feel really comfortable… And I think that's where I feel most comfortable in gender identity too and I'm not really sure what that says about me, but I really love that turtle pond.

For Bloo, though it was not a queer-specific space, the turtle pond offered a space where they felt affirmed and comfortable to express their nonbinary gender. Bloo, viewed the turtles as "emotional support turtles." The outdoor pond space represented a place on campus where all people, regardless of gender identity and expression, were free to just relax and exist while "appreciating turtles." Though this place represented a generally relaxing, calm environment on

campus, perhaps it was the nature of being around animals, where people were not actively speculating on the turtles' gender that helped make this a comfortable, relaxing space.

Though Bloo found a refuge in an outdoor campus space, other students found some outdoor spaces to be outright hostile. Similar to classroom spaces, hostility in outdoor spaces was often dependent upon who was in the space. Multiple participants recalled experiences where religious protestors made them feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in expressing their gender. For example, Charlie recalled how a group of protestors would stand in front of the student union and yell at passing students. Charlie continued, "They had these signs that were like 12 feet tall, like giant. And they would just like... You could not miss them if you wanted to. You couldn't walk... Walk around them 'cause of the location they were in." Charlie also expressed disappointment in the inaction of university administration when these visitors were on campus. Fae recalled a similar experience on their campus where religious protestors would stop students and attempt to preach to them. Fae remembered feeling targeted by the preacher who misgendered them. After the confrontation, Fae recalled, "The next day I was like, I don't want anyone to see me, and I put my hair into a ponytail and wore a hat and just covered up all my body, 'cause that was... 'Cause the guy picked me out, he was like, "Excuse me, ma'am." I just had to... He trapped me."

As evidenced by participants' stories, outdoor spaces, depending upon who was present, could serve as positive or negative experiences for nonbinary students. Participants shared the power that people have to dictate how campus spaces feel for them, both positive and negative.

Involvement Spaces

Though many students found kinship within queer-specific involvement opportunities on campus, as discussed previously in this chapter, involvement opportunities that were not directly supporting queer students were not always welcoming. Many students recognized hostile environments within involvement opportunities and organizations on their campuses. Azélie shared an experience with a service-based organization that caused discomfort following when it came to their gender expression. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this service sorority relaxed its usual membership guidelines and accepted any student who applied for membership. However, as Azélie remembered, the group fell under the leadership of "three really homophobic, transphobic individuals who were quiet about their homophobia and transphobia until they happened to be elected to officer positions." After these students took over running the group, they approached Azélie and gave the ultimatum, "Get out or we'll kick you out" despite the groups constitution stating that they did not discriminate against gender expression. Azélie ultimately left the organization rather than deal with the continued abuse. Tsuyan also shared feeling uncomfortable in certain involvement opportunities, specifically the student government association, which Tsuyan described as having a "cis, heteronormative standard." According to Tsuyan, "The student government is mostly led by people who are cisgendered heterosexual. They acknowledge it, but they're not quite understanding, and it doesn't feel like they make an effort to be understanding."

Summary

Overall, campuses were contradictory when it came to their support of nonbinary students. Many students found campuses to be a refuge where they could freely explore their gender expression, but that was not without limits. While some campus spaces, such as queer-focused spaces and those with queer-affirming people, were mostly positive, other spaces, like

highly gendered spaces such as fraternity houses and gyms, were negative. There were some spaces, classrooms, outdoor spaces, and involvement spaces that provided mixed experiences for participants, but those were often dependent upon who was present in the spaces.

Written and Unwritten Dress Codes

When sharing about their exploration of gender expression at Southern research institutions, many participants articulated how they often had to navigate structural, written dress codes, such as ideals of professionalism, and socialized, unwritten dress codes, such as expectations from other to behave in particular ways. Both written and unwritten dress codes were often tied to people's misconceptions about participants' observable characteristics, such as their body type.

Written Dress Codes

Likely because all participants were purposefully drawn from public research universities, many did not cite explicit, written regulations regarding their dress and presentation. However, a common theme among graduate student participants was the idea of professionalism and what it means to navigate professionalism as a nonbinary person. Many of the graduate students shared that, when professionalism was addressed either in their work environments or in their academic environments, it was often still reliant upon notions of a gender binary. For example, Buie recalled seminars and lectures from older professors in the field who shared about policy and public outreach and how to appear professional. In this case, as Buie said, the professors perpetuated that:

> There is still very much an expectation for that sort of binary gender expression and how to be a professional woman, ‘cause I get that’s the way that a lot of people see me, and so trying to navigate that is tough sometimes.

In fact, Buie pointed out that most of the discomfort they felt in exploring their gender expression on campus came in conversations about the “application of some of these long-held traditions of professionalism and what professionalism is.” Charlie similarly found these conversations around professionalism tough to navigate on campus. However, Charlie remembered experiences where the conversations around professionalism went beyond just appearance and included mannerisms and roles as well:

> I think definitely whenever I was more fem-presenting, I was expected to... Like, within a professional situation or within my former grad program, I was expected to be, it seemed, quieter or more submissive or to be the note taker or to be the person that keeps things organized or whatever, or to play a background role in creating things.

Clearly, conversations around what it means to appear professional, in manner and dress, caused participants discomfort. Green shared these same feelings and often struggled to know how to appear professional while still being true to themself.

Link similarly pointed out how professionalism was a difficult ideal to navigate as, “who is defining what professional is?” However, Link also identified a double standard existed in what it means to be professional. As Link reflected:

> I feel like I've also had people tell me that I don't dress professional, which is funny because in... If you're thinking of cis-heteronormative, you go to the bar at 5:00 p.m. for happy hour, and you see all of these cis men in these baby blue button ups and their

> khakis, and they're all drinking the same disgusting beer, it's like, to me, that's what they mean when they're saying I'm not dressing professional.

Link shared about how cisgender men can wear the same outfit as them, but be viewed as professional, whereas if Link is wearing the same outfit, they are not necessarily viewed as professional in campus spaces as they are not appearing in traditionally feminine ways. Green recalled a similar experience at an on-campus ceremony for their program. They shared feeling "like I'm underdressed" as they were wearing khaki pants, while most other students assigned female at birth were wearing dresses. They felt this way even though a majority of the non-female students were wearing khaki pants. However, the expectations from others made Green feel as if "I was a little bit casual, also wearing khakis for some reason."

Despite these difficult navigations with professionalism, many of the participants also identified a sense of empowerment through coming to terms with what professionalism meant to them as nonbinary professionals. For example, Buie reflected on how professionalism needed to be conceived of in a new way:

> I think it may be better to at least frame it in the sense of, "This is what people who are in power, in leadership roles think is professional," rather than, "This is what is professional and is correct." Frame it more as different people have different opinions on what is considered professionalism.

Green also redefined what it meant to them to be professional, recollecting how in their early college years, they decided, "It doesn't matter how I dress. What I am is not dependent upon how others perceive me." Link, who often challenged what it meant to dress professionally in their work environment, had similar feelings to Green. Link shared that their being professional was

not dependent upon another person's definition of professionalism as, "Whatever it is, I don't care."

Though few explicit, written dress codes existed at the public research institutions, some participants, more evident among graduate students, shared how concepts of professionalism were both difficult to navigate and, at times, uncomfortable. Despite being uncomfortable, some participants also found empowerment in redefining what it meant for them to be professional, rather than relying upon others' preconceived definitions of professionalism.

Unwritten Dress Codes

Just as some participants had to navigate structural, written dress codes, nearly every participant shared about instances where they were faced with social expectations on campus that effected how they explored their gender expression. For some participants, this meant hiding part of their identity in order to avoid potentially distressing conversations. For example, Ariel shared:

> I'm scared to confuse my professors or something. I don't want them to... I don't want them to think I'm weird or anything, and so I usually just try to present pretty femininely or when they ask about pronouns and stuff I just... I try not to say anything if I can get away with it but if I can't, I just tell them like "she, her" pronouns just so that... I know they're supposed to respect your pronouns and call you whatever you want but a part of me just thinks it's not gonna turn out the way I want, so I usually lie about that.

Ariel's experiences were not limited to the classroom. They also recalled that they often felt that they were given "weird looks" and that they would "make some people confused" if they expressed their nonbinary gender on campus. So, though Ariel preferred to express their gender

through more androgynous fashion, they often found themself "dressing either femininely or trying to do something to make it not look like I'm purposely trying to dress androgynously."

Similarly, Azélie found that others' expectations of their gender expression would, at times, dictate how they decided to dress in campus spaces. They reflected that it was easier to express their gender in affirming ways when "independent of social pressures." Bloo recalled feeling tokenized, especially outside of queer spaces on campus:

> I don't really know how to put it into words 'cause it's sort of just like, it feels a little less, it's not tense, but it's a little less, I don't know. It's less tense, but not like tense-tense, not like uncomfortable with tension. Like there's an elephant in the room, but more like an uncomfortable tension of I have to hold it in or I should hold it in or that... I don't know, kind of being looked at like the token or a token but in queer spaces, it kind of doesn't feel like that it's more of like we are all the token together or something like that.

Nolan also found themself appearing in ways that would help them avoid social discomfort. They reflected that they felt more comfortable to express their nonbinary gender at home, as "when I'm out in public, I definitely think about how I express more... I'm trying to fit a mold more, I think, when I'm kind of at work and on campus, in order to not have that misgendering." Ren similarly felt pressure to fit a certain mold as "I'm really self-conscious about how people see me." They went on to share that they "don't want [others] to have any specific thoughts other than, 'Wow, that person looks good.'" Ren avoided expressing their gender "on either side of the spectrum" as a way to avoid social pressures.

Just as Azélie, Bloo, Nolan, and Ren felt social pressures to appear certain ways on campus, Fae reflected on what it meant to navigate these feelings on a college campus in the South:

> There's an expectation around here, because of the prevalence of Greek life and being in the South and everything, that girls are very girly and guys are very masculine, and so you see a lot of people walking in the campus, and they're like just athleisure. All the girls wear athleisure and tennis skirts, and have long flowing hair, and they're tan, and they shave their legs, and they're just very feminine, traditional femininity, I guess.

Often, participants were shoehorned by others' expectations that were framed around a binary gender and binary gender expression and expectations.

Some participants also shared how peoples' expectations of them were tied to observable characteristics about their bodies. For example, Link recalled reactions they would receive when wearing a crop top and tight jeans. Often, people would say to them, "'Oh, you're so brave for wearing that.' And I'm like, 'Oh, okay.' Like, 'Moving on. I don't want to have this conversation with you. I'm not... I don't need your approval.'" Ren also experienced having people create expectations based upon initial reactions to their gender expression:

> I have a tendency to have my headphones in so I don't talk and I don't express anything other than just looking around, so when people talk to me and they hear my voice, which is a bit more high pitched, they have a tendency to look at my entire body first and it's a little uncomfortable because they can't seem to pinpoint if I just have a high-pitched voice or if I'm a gender other than what they're expecting. So that's something I've experienced, so there's a lot of pauses when they talk to me, some people are very

> cautious, some people ask my pronouns first, which I find weird ‘cause not... I know when I'm around people who look like their gender, who are cis, they don’t get asked that question, but I get asked that question a lot. So it’s kind of like, are you targeting me or something like that?

Just as Link and Ren found peoples’ perceptions of them to be tied to physical characteristics, Azélie found themself consistently misgendered based upon their appearance. They shared:

> I have noticed I get misgendered regardless of what I wear, if I present more androgynous or masculine, if anything, they’ll still “she,” “her,” or “ma’am” me, but there will be this awkward pause where they just stare at me and then look exactly where I don’t want them to look and go, “Ah, boobs, that’s a girl.’ Which is just so uncomfortable like, Oh, that’s how you're gonna tell if I’m a girl or not, great. I don’t want you looking there, thank you very much.

Participants often found that others’ expectations of them dictated social pressures to express and appear in certain ways, especially while on campus.

Despite these pressures, a number of participants also shared that they felt empowered expressing their gender in the face of others’ expectations. Tack reflected that “I don’t really care what people think about me” when expressing their nonbinary gender. Furthermore, thinking on how friends recommended that they dress more formally when attending classes and being on campus spaces, Tack shared:

> Expectations, if there are any, I will say that I ignore them. I don’t really care. Like I’ve had a bunch of people tell me that... Especially during the first week when me and all my friend's fucking laughed at it, just like, “Oh, you should dress formally for your

> professors, like yada yada," and I'm like, "Please, shut up. I'm paying to go to their class. If I wanna show up in my fucking pajamas, I will." And it's funny, one of my friends did for just the first day and we all kind of ribbed him about it.

Tsuyan, though it felt more "boxed in" when not in queer spaces on campus, reflected how expressing faeself in a more feminine manner was "enjoyable performative" despite usually appearing more masculine when free from social pressures. Phoenix also found empowerment in expressing their gender in ways that were free from social pressures. They shared:

> I want to show up first day to class wearing something like a wild tie or different colors or something like that, where I wouldn't necessarily want to show up in a party outfit, but it's just something that makes an impression.

In the face of social expectations and pressures on campus, many participants found ways to feel empowered in their exploration of their gender expression.

Interestingly, a few participants shared that they did not feel social pressures against their nonbinary gender expression on campus. For example, Harper said:

> I feel pretty lucky 'cause I think that, like I've not had a bad experience. I've definitely avoided bad experiences, and I think a lot of that just comes from my acceptance of the way that I present… to the world I present as a cis white dude. So it's a pretty safe costume.

Harper did share that their appearance as a "cis white dude" did sometimes lead to uncomfortable situations as, "I'm present for people saying things that if they knew how I identified, they probably wouldn't say it around me." Dabi found themself to have many positive

experiences on campus, as well. They reflected on going from high school to college, sharing, "there's no dress code, and no one's really judging you as much."

Participants shared how they navigated structural, written dress codes, such as ideals of professionalism, and socialized, unwritten dress codes, such as expectations from other to behave and express their gender in particular ways. Both written dress codes and unwritten dress codes were often tied to other peoples' perceptions of how gender should be expressed through things like professionalism, dress, and mannerisms. While many participants found these interactions uncomfortable, some found empowerment through expressing their nonbinary gender identities. Other participants even felt that they were free from the social expectations of others.

Expression Related to Other Social Identities

Though it was not explicitly part of the central research question, some participants shared how their exploration of gender expression was closely tied to other salient social identities. It is worth noting that, while many participants identified as White, during sampling, I attempted to get a wide variety of self-reported social identities. Other social identities that participants held that affected their exploration of gender expression were tied to religion, socioeconomic class, race, sexuality, and neurodivergence.

Religion

Some participants shared how their religious experiences affected their exploration of gender identity and expression. Overall, religion had a negative effect. For example, when reflecting on their gender expression and growing up in a religious family, Fae recalled, "There's been a lot of religious influence. I don't wanna talk badly about it. It's just like, for me, it wasn't a great experience. But yeah, I stopped going to church." For Fae, their religious upbringing led to

family that was unwelcoming and not understanding of nonbinary genders, which restricted their ability to freely explore their gender expression and identity. Link, who attended religious schools as a child, also reflected on how the expectations at religious institutions stifled their ability to explore their gender expression. They remembered:

> I always wanted to wear my dad's ties, and I wanted to wear them to school, but I was also forced to go to private Catholic school, and so we had to wear a uniform. And I didn't wanna wear the girl's uniform because I didn't want to wear the skirts, and they obviously forced you to adhere to like, this is... Boys wear the trousers and the button-up with a tie, and then girls wear whatever this dumbass skirt overall thing is.

For these participants, religion played a limiting role in how they were able to explore their gender expression.

Socioeconomic Status

A few participants also shared how their socioeconomic status affected how they were able to explore their gender expression. Link reflected on "growing up extremely poor" and how it limited their ability to explore their gender. Fae similarly felt that their current socioeconomic status made it difficult to not only explore their gender expression, but also take care of everyday tasks like changing their gender marker on their student ID. When reflecting on their most difficult experiences related to exploring their gender expression, Fae shared multiple times that having little money made it difficult to buy items that allowed them to explore and feel affirmed in their nonbinary gender expression. Similarly, Fae considered what would make their experience better on campus:

> Making it easier to use your preferred name and pronouns would be very nice, especially on things like Blackboard and student IDs and stuff, not having to pay money to change it. That's stupid, not very nice. I don't like that. Some of us don't have a lot of funds.

For participants, their socioeconomic status shifted how they were able to explore their gender expression on campus.

Race

Just as some participants revealed that religion and socioeconomic class were important to their exploration of gender expression, some also identified their racial identity as being important. Tsuyan recognized how being indigenous-American shaped how they viewed their gender identity and expression. Fae shared, "I identify as two-spirit … So, for me, it means that I embody both the feminine and masculine spirit in my gender role, in how I choose to present my gender." Fae went on further to say that their indigenous identity allowed them to accept others' conceptions of gender more easily. Tsuyan shared:

> Yeah, so I come from cultures that don't have a necessary binary understanding of gender, which I feel like it's helped me be a lot more able to see other people as not strictly male or female, and especially when it comes to just, "I identify as this, this is my pronouns, this is my name," it's easy for me to just go, "Okay, this is your name, this is your pronouns," and I don't necessarily have that road block of, I see a woman therefore I think that's a woman.

Ren, who identified as Filipino-American, also recognized how their Asian identity influenced their understanding of gender identity and exploration of gender expression. Ren shared that

Asian conceptions of gender and masculinity and femininity are "just so much different than Western ideas of it." Ren later continued:

> I can be regal and refined without being feminine, because that is something that you are taught, something you're learned within your culture, and it affects me a lot, 'cause my idea of masculinity is a bit more feminine than what's considered masculine in the United States.

For both Ren and Tsuyan, their racial identity played an important role in their understandings of gender identity and their explorations of gender expression.

Sexuality

Another salient identity important in exploring their gender expression shared by one participant was their sexuality. Buie identified as a lesbian and found that their lesbian identity was important to their understanding of their nonbinary gender identity as well as their exploration of gender expression. Identifying as a lesbian also allowed Buie to have a more specific description for how they viewed their gender expression:

> I don't typically think in terms of, oh this is non-binary or androgynous fashion, but I will see something and go, "Oh that is a lesbian shirt, I wanna wear that…." I will describe my clothing or my fashion sense more in terms of the lesbian community more so because obviously that is an extremely diverse community, but it has a more... You can more identify I think the look or the style or different kinds of lesbian styles, more so than just non-binary or agender, because that's such a broad term.

For Buie, identifying as a part of the lesbian community was important in their understanding of their gender identity and their exploration of their gender expression.

Neurodivergence

Two participants also related that their identities as neurodivergent as important to their exploration of gender expression and identity. Tsuyan shared experiences as identifying as autistic. On faer campus, Tsuyan found that faer experiences with the Autistic Student Association were some of the most supportive and affirming. With this organization, Tsuyan felt that it was "an accepting and open place that I feel most comfortable being in." Similarly, Nolan found that identifying as neurodivergent impacted their gender expression. According to Nolan, "I think having ADHD kind of affects it. I've heard from a lot of other people, that neurodivergence sometimes corresponds with gender diversity, so that's part of... I associate the two as being kind of building off of each other." For these participants, they found importance and understanding of their gender expression and identity through their neurodivergent status.

Summary

Participants' narratives revealed several themes related to the central research question: What are the experiences of nonbinary college students in the Southern United States in exploring their gender expression at research universities? The five major themes discussed within this chapter were the symbiotic relationship between identity and expression, queer community and kinship, written and unwritten dress codes, campus as contradictory, and gender expression is related to other salient identities. All of these themes were related to participants' abilities to explore their gender expression and identity on Southern research institution campuses.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the use of narrative inquiry and photovoice, participants shared and reflected on their experiences related to the central research question: What are the experiences of nonbinary college students in the Southern United States in exploring their gender identity and expression at research universities? From participants' narratives and reflection, five major themes emerged. In this chapter, I will summarize those themes, discuss implications of the themes to existing literature, identify where the findings depart from current literature, offer implications for practice, and offer recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Through narratives and reflections, nonbinary participants shared their experiences with exploring their gender expression and identity at Southern research institutions. Participants revealed a number of themes related to the central research question. First, participants' narratives highlighted the symbiotic relationship between gender identity and gender expression. Stories within this theme related how participants' gender expression and gender identity formed alongside one another. Exploring gender expression allowed participants to feel more affirmed in their gender identity and vice versa. Second, participants revealed the importance of queer community and kinship. Stories related to this finding included how participants often found queer friends, partners, and mentors, as well as community built through queer campus spaces as important in their exploration of gender expression.

The third major finding was that campus was contradictory for many participants. A majority of participants found campus to be a type of refuge away from unsupportive or unwelcoming families. There were several affirming spaces, such as queer spaces and LGBTQIA+ centers, antagonizing spaces, such as fraternity houses and gyms, and spaces that

were both affirming and antagonizing, such as outdoor spaces, classrooms, and involvement spaces. Often, in these dual spaces, the type of people in the space made the difference in whether it was perceived as affirming or antagonistic.

A fourth theme that came from participant narratives was the existence of structural, written dress codes and socialized, unwritten dress codes. While structural dress codes most often related to professionalism and working on campus, socialized dress codes were found across campus spaces from classrooms to involvement spaces. Participants often expressed the need to code switch or cover, both literally and figuratively, parts of themselves in some spaces in order to avoid distressing or uncomfortable conversations. Other people's expectations of participants were often tied to observable characteristics or body types, as well. Despite all this, many participants revealed finding a kind of meaningful empowerment in expressing themselves however they wanted in the face of others' expectations.

A fifth theme from participants' stories was that gender expression and their understanding of gender identity were often related to other social identities held by participants. Students reported that their experiences with religious identity, racial identity, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and ability status informed how they explored their gender expression. Participants often shared how these identities not only led to new understandings, but also opened them up to supportive communities who shared these salient identities.

The findings from participants' narratives and reflections were meaningful and will be used for the remainder of this chapter in examining the discussion and implications, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion and Implications

The following section will consider the findings from participants' narratives in relation to the central research question and how they confirm, add, depart from existing literature on our understanding of how nonbinary college students explore their gender expression on college campuses. As Diamond (2020) argued, exploring gender expression is one way that individuals feeling distress over their gender identity can begin to resolve those negative feelings. Participants in the current study often cited how their exploration of gender expression occurred as they were exploring their gender identity, which often led them to feeling affirmed in both their gender identity and their gender expression. Furthermore, participants also described various types of exploration, both in terms of identity and expression, which is present in Lev's (2004) model of transgender emergence.

A common theme in the identity development literature was the importance of finding queer community (Austin, 2016; Bilodeau, 2005; Lev, 2004) and integration into queer spaces and social networks (Bilodeau, 2005; Lev, 2004). Participants often found comfort and importance in their relationships, both platonic and romantic, with other queer individuals, as well as finding queer affirming spaces and communities on their campuses.

The theme of participants seeking queer individuals and queer spaces while exploring their gender expression also echoed the work of Flint, Kilgo, and Bennet (2019). In their study, Flint et al. (2019) sought to understand how nonbinary students navigated their campuses. Participants in their study often cited the campus LGBTQ+ center as a safe space where they could be themselves. This finding was reiterated by participants in my study, who often found campus LGBTQ+ centers and departments to be some of the most affirming spaces on campus. Despite this, participants in Flint et al.'s (2019) study reported that they would often choose

paths that were visible and where they could "blend in with the crowd" (p. 448) for their own safety. Often, participants in my study shared similar feelings, choosing to mask parts of themselves or want to cover themselves literally and figuratively to ensure their own safety while on campus. For example, Fae recalled avoiding walking by certain spaces, such as fraternity houses, and covering up when wanting to remain unseen by others.

Existing research has often cited how campus climate for minoritized students can affect their experiences on campus (e.g., Muñoz & Murphy, 2014). In fact, climate studies have consistently shown that if queer students perceive a negative or chilly campus climate, their experiences suffer with academics (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2014; Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Woodford & Kulick, 2015), levels of involvement (Rankin, Hesp, & Weber, 2013), identity development (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Rankin et al., 2010), and overall health and wellness (Woodford, Krentzman, & Gattis, 2012).

Participants echoed many of these findings. For example, many participants shared how their experiences within classrooms were dependent upon affirming and welcoming faculty members. Some participants, such as Ren and Ariel, chose not to express their gender openly in classroom spaces, as they found their faculty to not be respectful of their identities. Phoenix also recalled an experience having to argue with a professor who did not want to use their correct pronouns. Conversely, some students, such as Tack, had positive experiences in the classroom; however, positive experiences were dependent upon having informed faculty or faculty who also identified as queer and could relate with their experiences. Many participants in the study, regardless of whether they identified positive or negative experiences in the classroom, found that much of the curriculum was "cisgender-centric" as described by Garvey et al. (2014).

Within my study, participants shared how involvement was often tied to their perception of the environment. While many participants, such as Ren and Buie, found welcoming and affirming involvement spaces, others, such as Azélie, limited their involvement because the environment for nonbinary people was outright hostile. By limiting their involvement, the organization kept Azélie from being able to continue their preferred level of involvement.

In terms of identity development and exploration, many participants in my current study echoed Garvey and Rankin's (2015) findings in that campus and classroom climates affected how and when they chose to disclose their nonbinary identity. Furthermore, just as in Garvey and Rankin (2015), some participants, such as Ren and Ariel, selected to not disclose their nonbinary identity out of fears of mistreatment, misgendering, and overall disrespect.

Though health and wellness was not a major theme in my study, one participant in my study did articulate their struggles navigating campus health centers as a nonbinary person. Woodford et al. (2013) and Dunbar et al. (2017) found that nonbinary students often faced hostility and barriers when it came to seeking healthcare on campus. In my study, Charlie reflected how they struggled to seek care on campus. In fact, they were often "terrified" that they would not receive proper care if they were open about their nonbinary identity, causing them to feel unsafe in campus health facilities.

Research on appearance often cited that gender expression was often formed through managing the expectations of others (e.g., Featherstone, 1991). Previous literature on queer experiences with gender expression have shown that students wearing clothing perceived as incongruent with their gender identity caused discrimination and stigmatization (Kosciw et al., 2018). This was something that participants in my study also experienced. Participants were often met with expectations based upon other people's perceptions of their bodies or

characteristics and were met with discrimination when they transgressed these expectations. As evidenced by previous literature, queer individuals often found their expression to hinge on the tension of balancing masculinity with femininity (Clarke & Smith, 2015; Ocampo, 2012; Reddy-Best & Pederson, 2015) and that their navigations of expression were mediated by environmental contexts (Reddy-Best & Pederson, 2015). Participants in my study shared similar feelings. Participants, such as Fae, Charlie, and Ariel, often described how they sought to balance their expression. Consistently, participants in my study revealed how their exploration of gender expression was heavily contingent upon environment and how welcoming they perceived the environment to be.

Nicalozzo (2017) and Yoshino (2006) described how those with minoritized identities often utilize techniques of passing and covering or blending in and hiding stigmatized social identities. Often, students engaged in passing and covering to protect their own safety across various environments and environmental contexts. Participants in my study shared similar feelings, and often chose to hide their identity or dress in overtly feminine or masculine ways to appear in ways that would not draw attention. Participants, such as Ren and Ariel, often did this out of concern for their own safety and comfort.

Additions to Current Literature

While participants' narratives and reflections often confirmed existing literature related to how nonbinary people explore and express gender, there were departures from what is currently known that add to our understanding of their experiences. For example, much of the literature that did focus specifically on nonbinary college students were comprised exclusively of undergraduate students. In my current study, participants' narratives revealed that graduate students did have unique experiences when it came to navigating gender expression, especially in

work environments where professionalism was questioned. Furthermore, graduate students' experiences differed based upon their roles. For example, participants who served as graduate teaching assistants felt they had to navigate their gender expression and presentation with their students as well as their faculty mentors. Differences were seen in the classroom settings, such as in labs versus traditional classroom settings, and faculty members' knowledge and support of expansive definitions of gender affected the comfortability of graduate student participants.

A second theme that emerged uniquely from my study was that participants often found that in addition to their gender identities, other salient identities were important in their exploration of gender expression. Participants shared how their racial identities, religious identities, socioeconomic statuses, and ability identities shaped how they viewed, experienced, and expressed nonbinary gender. Though it was beyond the scope of the current study to provide detailed intersectional analysis of these participants' experiences, this was a common theme to emerge from the data.

Another unique contribution from this current study that was not found in the literature is how students often felt empowered when they were transgressing expectations of others, freeing themselves from others social pressures, or redefining professionalism. Though participants sometimes felt boxed in when not in explicitly queer spaces, others, such as Tsuyan, found their ability to express their gender however they wanted as "enjoyably performative."

Finally, while Flint et al.'s (2019) study was focused on a single campus in the Southeastern U.S., the current study included experiences across several Southern research institutions. While the experiences described are not necessarily unique to nonbinary students in the South, some participants, such as Link and Fae, noted how being in the South shaped their experiences in exploring gender expression.

Implications for Practice

Participants' narratives and reflections revealed several themes that have implications for higher education practice. First, it is important to consider the sociopolitical climate in the south for trans and nonbinary people. Additional themes are related to improving campus climate, improving training for higher education professionals, and expanding opportunities for nonbinary students to explore their gender expression.

Considering the South

Currently, the sociopolitical climate in the southern United States is overtly violent and hostile for trans and nonbinary people. In 2021, anti-LGBTQ legislation was so widespread, that the Human Rights Campaign labeled it as the "worst year in recent history" for anti-LGBTQ legislation (Ronan, 2021, para. 1). However, anti-LGBTQ legislation filed at the state level in the first three months of 2022 has already surpassed the total number filed in 2021. By the end of March 2022, the U.S. has seen 238 anti-LGBTQ bills filed, nearly 50 more than were filed in all of 2021 (Lavietes & Ramos, 2022). Furthermore, this legislation is overwhelmingly targeting trans individuals, specifically their "ability to play sports, use bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity, and receive gender-affirming healthcare" (Lavietes & Ramos, 2022, para. 4). This legislation is even more prevalent in the southern United States (Freedom for All Americans, 2022) where we see legislation such as Florida's "Parental Rights in Education" bill, otherwise known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, which, among other things, limits educators' abilities to teach about gender identity and expression (Diaz, 2022). Other southern states, like Alabama and North Carolina, are considering bills that would criminalize offering gender-affirming healthcare to minors and even adults seeking such care up to 20 years-old (Romo, 2022). It is important for those working in higher education, especially in the south, to be aware

of their state policy climates for their nonbinary and queer students. Such bills, though they largely target minors, will still profoundly affect the development of queer and nonbinary students. It will be increasingly imperative for higher education professionals to understand how to work with the nonbinary students on their campus and connect them to appropriate resources, especially those around things such as healthcare and education. With this in mind, higher education professionals must remain aware of queer students' perceptions of campus climate, continue to learn through improved training, and work to expand opportunities for nonbinary students to explore their gender identity and expression.

Campus Climate

Participants consistently related how their perceptions of campus climate and campus spaces effected their ability to freely explore and express their nonbinary identities on campus. Many students found spaces that were traditionally heteronormative or overtly masculine, such as gyms or fraternity houses, to be threatening. Campus educators can and should work to improve the perceptions of these spaces. For example, educators can work to shift the image of such spaces by ensuring that they have representation and adequate facilities for nonbinary students. In terms of campus gyms or health centers, campus leaders should work to add spaces that would allow nonbinary students specific areas where they can comfortably change, shower, or prepare to workout. Campus gyms may also consider partnering with campus LGBT+ and gender centers to provide workout classes or times specifically for people in these communities. Furthermore, gym staff should partner with these centers to ensure that they are not unintentionally outing students who choose to participate in such classes. In terms of fraternity houses, campus educators can work with leaders in such organizations, both locally and nationally, to educate members about issues related to gender discrimination. With such long

histories, changing the cisheteronormative culture of fraternities will not happen overnight, but focus could be placed upon recruitment practices to aid in creating more affirming spaces.

Second, higher education leaders should work towards providing leaders in traditionally gendered organizations, such as fraternities, with required trainings on how to work with and for nonbinary students and students from queer communities. Such trainings could be focused upon teaching these organization leaders on how to create safe and affirming spaces as well as support nonbinary students in their involvement opportunities on campus.

Improved Training

To improve the experiences and overall campus climate for nonbinary students, institutions of higher education should also improve training for higher education professionals. Participants' narratives consistently reiterated how supportive, informed staff and faculty made positive impacts on how they experienced campus spaces, including classrooms. Campus educators have a responsibility to nonbinary students to be well-versed in the experiences of nonbinary students and terminology. As such, campuses should require trainings for faculty and staff on how to support nonbinary students and how to create inclusive classroom and campus spaces. Such trainings could include discussions around queer-related language and pronouns, and include firsthand accounts from nonbinary students, whether through research or compensated appearance from nonbinary students in the campus community—though educators will want to be careful not to burden nonbinary students to take part. Furthermore, as community was often found to be important by nonbinary participants, educators can focus on community building on their campus. First, by providing spaces that allow queer students to form and develop community, and second, by forming a community of well-informed, prepared campus educators. Rather than creating a new training that could potentially fatigue educators who feel

overwhelmed by the number of required trainings, this information could inform additions or updates to existing nondiscrimination, classroom management, or Safe Zone trainings.

Improved training also speaks to the importance and responsibility of preparing future higher education and student affairs professionals through graduate preparation programs. Graduate preparation programs should include formal curriculum and instruction around the experiences of nonbinary students, including identity development and gender expression exploration. Through improved training and formal education in graduate preparation programs, we can begin to build networks of trained campus educators. By preparing these networks of informed campus educators, institutions of higher education can improve campus climate by creating a culture where campus educators are actively and intentionally looking to improve their knowledge and the experiences of nonbinary students.

Expanding Opportunities

Campuses and campus educators should work to expand opportunities for students to explore their gender expression on campus. This can be done in a number of ways. First, beyond offering trainings to organization and campus leaders, trainings, information sessions, and focus groups can be offered for students who are interested in exploring their gender expression. These sessions can focus on providing students with resources as well as help students build networks of similar students. Next, campuses can take this one step further by hosting gender expression closets where they keep clothing items that students can rent out to use and explore their gender expression with. This would be similar to professional closets that some campuses have where students are able to rent out “professional” clothing for presentations and interviews. Finally, a goal of campus educators should be to assist nonbinary students or just those who are exploring their gender identity or expression with spaces to find and develop community. As queer

community was often cited as important by participants, helping nonbinary students to find and form peer groups could potentially be extremely valuable to nonbinary students. Moreover, encouraging all students, regardless of their gender identity, to explore their gender expression could assist in creating more affirming, positive campus spaces.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several directions for future research where this study can be further developed. First, As Lange, Duran, and Jackson (2019) argued, there is a need for further LGBT-focused research, "committed to intersectional analysis… grounded in the lives of queer and trans people" (p. 520). It was beyond the scope of the current study to intentionally focus upon intersectional analysis. As such, future researchers could build upon this study by intentionally studying nonbinary students who hold and experience multiple minoritized identities. Next, while the current study was focused upon research institutions in the Southern U.S., future studies could expand beyond these sampling parameters and intentionally include participants from other regions of the U.S., such as the Midwest. Additionally, researchers could expand upon the institution types included within their framework, as the stories of nonbinary students from all institution types, such as private, religious institutions could provide additional important insights.

Previous research, as well as this study, also shows the importance of campus spaces for nonbinary students. Future studies focus upon spaces mentioned by participants to understand the roles they play in students' campus experiences. For example, future studies could examine nonbinary students' experiences within campus health facilities and gyms, which are often rooted in more binary gendered expectations. Similarly, as nonbinary students often found comfort in spaces with visible queer markers, such as pride flags, and out queer educators, future

researchers could more closely examine these spaces to better understand how and why these spaces are affirming for nonbinary students, beyond campus visibility. Such studies could help inform practice in spaces outside of the queer and gender centers on campuses. Similarly, future researchers could consider the ways that queer community show up and support nonbinary students. Future studies could consider how queer community is not only built but how it functions on campuses, beyond having shared identity among community members. For example, what roles does the queer community play on campuses and how do they play it? Finally, future studies could delineate the experiences of graduate and undergraduate students, as graduate students often shared unique experiences when considering how to express their gender "professionally" in work and academic environments.

Summary

The preceding chapter concluded the study of how nonbinary students explore gender expression and identity while enrolled at Southern research institutions. From participants narratives and reflections, five major themes emerged, which are as follows: the symbiotic relationship between gender identity and gender expression, queer community and kinship, contradictory campus, written and unwritten dress codes, and gender expression is related to other salient social identities.

The findings of this study are aligned with much of the research and literature already existing on the topic; however, several new insights also emerged through the nonbinary participants' narratives and reflections. This work represents a contribution to higher education literature through its unique focus on both gender expression and nonbinary students' experiences at Southern research institutions. Campus leaders have the opportunity to improve the experiences of nonbinary students through the lessons shared by the participants of this

study. The benefits of learning from these students have the potential to improve practice and campus climate for all students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Protocol

Before the interview and audio recording begins:

- Thank the participant
- Make sure participants has signed copy of consent form
- Make sure participant has filled out demographic questionnaire
- Clarify their pseudonym
- Ask if they have any questions before the interview begins
- Begin recording once participant has expressed consent to begin

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a bit about yourself
2. What is your favorite color?
3. Tell me about your life as a college student
    a. Prompts if needed: year in college, academic major, work, student organization involvement, other involvement, living on/off campus, etc.
4. How would you describe your gender identity?
5. How would you describe your typical gender expression?
    a. Prompts if needed: clothing, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, mannerisms, body modifications, etc.
6. How has your gender identity impacted the way you choose to express your gender (and vice versa)?
7. Can you describe your gender expression within different environments?
    a. Prompts if needed: while at work, on campus, at home, in the community

8. Can you describe how you've been treated or perhaps reactions you've perceived based upon your gender expression?
    a. How have these reactions differed across environments?
9. Describe environments on campus that have been particularly supportive or resistant to you or your gender expressions?
    a. Off campus?
    b. Why is this space important?
    c. How has it supported or been resistant to you or your development?
10. Describe who has been most important to you in your exploration of gender expression on campus?
    a. Off campus?
    b. Why are they important?
    c. What have they done to support you and your development?
11. Can you describe any expectations or influences you experience by people on campus?
    a. Prompts if needed: from faculty, advisor, classmates, peers, administrators, campus visitors, etc.
12. What have been your biggest challenges with gender expression while on campus?
    a. How do you address these challenges?
13. How has your college experience been impacted by your gender expression?
    a. Prompts if needed: academics, grades, involvement, work, etc.
14. What suggestions do you have for campus educators to better serve students who may be exploring their gender identities?

15. Can you describe any other instances related to your identity and expression that stand out that you would like to share?
16. Is there anything you wish I would have asked you?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Following the interview:

- Turn off the recording device
- Ask if they have any follow-up questions
- Remind them that transcripts will be emailed out in the coming months if they'd like to check them for accuracy
- Remind participants that photovoice prompts will be emailed to them following the interview.
    - Ask if they have any questions about the photovoice procedures.
- Thank the participant again for their participation

Appendix B – Photovoice Protocol

Immediately following the interview:

- Email students a single page with photovoice instructions, prompts, and deadlines
- Offer students a time to virtually meet to discuss photovoice if there is confusion

Photovoice instructions:

Over the course of the next two weeks, I request that you take 3-6 photographs (though you may do more or less depending on your comfortability) in response to the prompts below. For each photograph, please write a short, 1-2 sentence description describing what is in the photograph and its meaning to you (including any thoughts, emotions, or musings). Email the photos and descriptions directly to me at ct003@uark.edu. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to me directly at any time.

Other considerations:

- Please do not include any identifiable person in your photographs as we are not seeking their approval to be photographed.
- Only photograph what you feel comfortable sharing.
- You may use a smart phone for all photographs, and I would encourage you to for convenience and portability.
- All photographs will be censored to protect your confidentiality (if they include any identifiable features)

Prompts:

1. Take photograph(s) of campus spaces that have been important to you in your exploration of gender expression.

2. Take photograph(s) of yourself while expressing your gender in a way where you feel most affirmed.
3. Take photograph(s) of anything else that is important to you when considering your gender expression on campus.

After receiving the photographs:

- Remind participants that all photographs will be censored to ensure their confidentiality
- Thank participants for their time and energy in making the project happen
- Ask participants if they have any questions
- Read through descriptions and ask follow-up questions if necessary

Appendix C – Institutional Review Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

To:	Charles J Thompson
From:	Justin R Chimka, Chair IRB Expedited Review
Date:	09/24/2021
Action:	**Expedited Approval**
Action Date:	09/24/2021
Protocol #:	2108353620
Study Title:	How Nonbinary College Students at Southern Universities Explore Identity Through Gender Expression
Expiration Date:	09/05/2022
Last Approval Date:	

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Michael S Hevel, Investigator

Appendix D – Informed Consent

CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH AS A HUMAN PARTICPANT
Title of Project: **How Nonbinary College Students at Southern Universities Explore Identity Through Gender Expression**

Principal Investigator:
Charles J. Thompson, M.Ed. (University of Arkansas)

Research Supervisor:
Michael Hevel, Ph.D. (University of Arkansas)

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. You will also receive a copy of this form to keep for your reference. The Principal Investigator or their representative will provide you with any additional information that may be needed and answer any questions you may have. Read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before you decide whether to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Funding Source:
None

What is the purpose of the study?
The primary purpose of this study is to understand how nonbinary college students in the Southern United States experience exploring and expressing their gender identity while enrolled at research institutions.

What will be done if you agree to take part in this research study?
Participants will take part in an individual conversation audio recorded with the researcher. The audio interviews will take approximately 75 minutes. Participants will also be asked to photograph various campus spaces and themselves in relation to prompts provided by the researcher and reflect upon these photographs in 1-2 sentences. Participants will be asked to share these photographs and reflections with the researcher.

What are the possible discomforts and risks?
The potential risk will be that students will discuss their experiences with gender expression and gender identity on campus. Experiences or painful memories may lead to potential discomfort. Students will be provided with information on where to access counseling at each of their perspective universities.

What are the possible direct benefits to the participant for taking part in this research?
You may benefit from intentional reflection and developmental meaning-making through sharing your narratives. However, we do not guarantee that you will benefit from participation.

What are the possible benefits to society from this research?

The knowledge gained from this study may contribute to our understanding of how to best support nonbinary college students. The education system and leaders will benefit as well as future students may benefit from improved efforts based on the outcomes of the research.

Will there be any compensation for participation?
Participants will receive one $20 gift card as a thank you for participation.

If you do not want to take part in this study, what other options are available to you?
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to be in the study or to withdraw from the study at any time. Your refusal will not influence current or future relationships with the University of Arkansas.

How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your research records be protected?
Your records may be viewed by the Institutional Review Board, but the confidentiality of your records will be protected to the extent permitted by law and by University policies. The data resulting from your participation may be used in publications and/or presentations but your identity will not be disclosed. Participants will also select pseudonyms that will be used in any de-identified data dissemination through publications and presentations.

How can you withdraw from this research study and whom should you contact if you have questions?
If you wish to stop your participation for any reason, please contact the principal investigator

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____ By providing your initials, you are providing an electronic signature to indicate consent to being audio recorded in the interview portion of the study.
_____ By providing your initials, you are providing an electronic signature to indicate consent to the researcher using your de-identified photographs in the publication of this study.

Please indicate a pseudonym (alternate name): _____

Please type your name here: _____ Date: _____

Charles J. Thompson
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

University of Arkansas IRB #