Gender Diverse Youth: Exploring Experiences of Social Support and Navigating Educational Institutions

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology

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Declaration

This thesis has been submitted for the award of Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Sheffield. It has not been submitted to any other institution, or for the purpose of obtaining any other qualifications.

Structure and Word Counts

Literature Review

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Research Report

Word count excluding references and tables: 7,999

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Lay Summary

Gender diverse youth are young people whose gender differs from the sex assigned at birth (e.g., transgender, non-binary, gender fluid). Research consistently shows that gender diverse youth experience poorer mental health than their cisgender peers (those whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth). This difference is understood to arise from stigma, discrimination and social pressures that build up over time, creating what is known as minority stress. Understanding gender diverse youths' everyday social experiences is essential for improving mental health outcomes.

Literature review

A systematic review and thematic synthesis explored how social support affects gender diverse youths' mental health from their perspectives. A search of four databases identified 17 eligible studies, analysed using Thomas and Harden's (2008) guidance, resulting in five themes. Findings showed that youth often worked hard to access support, which was most helpful when it was affirming, consistent and safe. Support was shaped by individuals and wider systems (e.g., educational institutions), highlighting the importance of using chosen names and pronouns, creating inclusive environments, and reducing the burden on youth to educate others.

Empirical review

Educational institutions (e.g., schools, colleges and universities) play a major role in youths' lives and research shows these settings can pose risks for gender diverse youth. A qualitative study explored how gender diverse youth experience educational institutions. Twelve participants aged 16-25 took photographs

representing their identity and discussed their experiences in semi-structured interviews. Reflexive Thematic Analysis showed that support was often fragile and dependant on individual staff and institutional features. Youth were often left responsible for managing their own safety and recognition. While participants showed resilience, this frequently came with emotional costs.

These chapters emphasise the need for safer, more consistent and affirming environments, so gender diverse youth don't have to work so hard to feel recognised and supported.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to express my utmost gratitude to the twelve people who took the time and effort to participate in this research. It was a privilege to hear your stories, and witness your strength, tenacity and creativity amongst many other wonderful qualities. Thank you for trusting me with your words, I hope that I have done justice in capturing your voices. I would also like to say a massive thank you to the wonderful people who have helped to shape and share the research. I am so grateful to each of you.

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Section One: Literature Review

Gender diverse youths' experiences and perceptions of social support in

relation to their mental health: a thematic synthesis

Abstract

Objectives

Social support has historically been identified as a protective factor for the mental health of gender diverse youth, whereas emerging research suggests a more nuanced and complex picture. This qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis aimed to explore how social support affects mental health from the perspective of gender diverse youth themselves.

Methods

A systematic search across four databases identified 17 published studies which met inclusion criteria. Studies were critically appraised using The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist and synthesised using Thomas and Harden's (2008) approach to thematic synthesis.

Results

Five analytic themes were developed: '*Support must contain active ingredient: the protective power of affirmation*', '*Support that isn't safe: ambivalent, conditional and variable support*', '*The hidden cost of social support*', '*High risk uncertain reward: safety in accessing support*' and '*Chosen family: lifeline when primary support systems fail*'.

Conclusions

Findings suggest that social support for gender diverse youth is negotiated, effortful, and highly context dependent. Its protective value hinges on the presence

of affirmation, consistency of support, perceived safety and reduced anticipated stigma. Support emerges as a dynamic interplay of affirmation, relational labour and structural context, offering important insights into the mechanisms through which social support influences mental health.

Practitioner Points

- Prioritise relational safety by consistently using chosen names and pronouns, demonstrating non-judgemental active listening, and holding awareness of minority stress processes. Relational safety reduces anticipated stigma which often shapes how gender diverse youth access support.
- Actively reduce the burden of self-advocacy by providing balanced high-quality information to families, schools and wider systems, thereby redistributing the burden on youth to educate others.
- Support youth access to alternative support networks, such as peer groups, community spaces and chosen family, recognising their crucial role when primary support systems (e.g., family) are inconsistent or unsafe.
- Advocate for inclusive structures in healthcare, education and community settings by minimising unnecessary barriers (e.g., administrative processes), while supporting youth to develop safe and adaptive strategies for navigating unsupportive contexts.

Introduction

Gender diverse youth are young people whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth, including those who identify as transgender, non-binary or gender fluid. A substantial body of research demonstrates higher levels of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation in these young people compared to their cisgender[1] counterparts (Bränström & Pachankis; 2021; de Graaf et al, 2021). These disparities are commonly understood within the broader context of stigma, discrimination and minority stress (Johnson et al., 2020a). The minority stress model proposes that stigmatising social environments generate chronic stress, which undermines wellbeing (Meyer, 2003). Such processes may be particularly salient for gender diverse youth, who often have limited autonomy over key social environments, including family homes and educational settings.

In the United Kingdom (UK), gender diverse youth have been impacted by a rapidly evolving socio-political landscape, including a major judicial review and the Cass Independent Review of the NHS Gender Identity Development Service (Cass, 2024). These developments have contributed to service restructuring and increased uncertainty regarding gender specific care pathways. Concurrently, increased public attention and polarised debate around gender specific healthcare have created a climate in which many young people may feel increasingly uncertain about what support is available to them.

Similar uncertainty has emerged within educational settings, where approaches to gender diversity have become increasingly contested (Weale, 2023).

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[1] Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity corresponds to the sex assigned to them at birth.

The Department of Education's (2023) draft non-statutory guidance for gender questioning students advises that school inform parents when pupils express gender variance and advise extreme caution regarding requests to change names, pronouns or uniform. The guidance has generated debate regarding its clarity and potential legal implications (Hilton, 2024). Given that schools constitute a central social environment for young people, in which policy can shape how support is experienced, it is notable that relatively little research has examined these issues from the perspectives of gender diverse youth themselves, representing a gap in the literature.

Within this shifting landscape of clinical and educational practice, social support has the potential to play an increasingly important role in shaping young people's experiences. Recent systematic reviews focusing on risk and resilience factors among gender diverse youth (Tankersley et al, 2021) and their lived experience and coping strategies (Tyni et al 2024), identify social support as a crucial protective factor for mental health. Although definitions vary, social support typically encompasses emotional, informational and practical assistance embedded within relationships across school, family, peers, and wider community members (McDonald, 2018). In their systematic review of social support, Dowers and colleagues (2020) conceptualise mental health inequities for gender diverse people as socially produced and thus equally socially mitigated, positioning social support as a critical buffer. A systematic review applying the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) to gender diverse adults similarly identified social support as a protective factor within a stigmatising societal context (Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). Together, these findings suggest that social support is a central determinant of mental health for gender diverse youth.

Research on social support has historically focussed on the presence or absence of support, while emerging quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest a more complex picture characterised by a mixture of acceptance and rejection (Sansfaçon et al, 2020; Allen et al, 2022). Qualitative methodologies offer a valuable tool for examining such complexity by capturing the contextual and relational nuance of young people's experiences (Wilson & Cariola, 2020). This is particularly important given that adolescence and emerging adulthood (ages ~16-25) are developmental periods characterised by identity development (Erikson, 1968; Arnett, 2000) and increased brain plasticity, leaving them more vulnerable to stress (Dahl, 2004; Eiland & Romeo, 2013), thus making supportive environments particularly significant.

To date, no qualitative syntheses have focussed specifically on how social support impacts the mental health of gender diverse youth from their own perspective. Gender diverse youths' voices are often underrepresented or filtered through parents or carers, despite the vital knowledge they hold about how support is navigated and experienced (Wilson & Cariola, 2020). Addressing this gap, the present study employs a qualitative systematic review and synthesis, guided by the SPIDER tool (Cooke, Smith & Booth, 2012), to explore the following research question:

How does social support affect mental health from the perspective of gender diverse youth?

Method

This systematic review was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) on the 10th March 2025 (https://osf.io/eag27/?view_only=d268e3a2f82342cea6606d38925200bf).

The aim of this review was to explore gender diverse youths' experiences through the synthesis of published qualitative data, and so Thematic Synthesis was selected as an appropriate method (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This approach is epistemologically flexible and aligns with the researcher's critical realist perspective, which assumes that reported experiences reflect both participants lived experiences and the underlying social mechanisms that shape them (Bhaskar, 1975).

Inclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1) were developed using the SPIDER tool (Table 2), to guide the screening procedure. Gender diverse youth are participants who self-identified as gender diverse, meaning that their gender identity differed to sex assigned at birth. Youth were defined as aged 25 or younger, based on the initial scoping of the literature and in alignment with Arnett's (2000) theory that key developmental tasks, such as identity exploration continue into the mid-twenties.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Published primary empirical studies for which participants' experiences/perceptions of social support and the perceived relationship with mental health are a key focus of the results and/or discussion.	Studies which are unavailable in English.
Qualitative or mixed method studies written in English, where substantial[a] qualitative data can be extracted.	Studies which are not published in a peer-reviewed journal.
Participants are gender diverse ≤25-year-olds. Studies which include participants from broader groups (e.g., LGBTQ+ participants) will be included where substantial[a] data from gender diverse participants can be extracted.	Quantitative study designs and studies which provide inadequate qualitative data (e.g., those that do not provide direct qualitative quotes from study participants).
Experiences and perceptions of social support relate to: social support networks which included school, family, peers, other adults or advisors and support groups. These experiences relate to participants' immediate settings (i.e., Bronfenbrenner's microsystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).	Studies that provide data on aspects of social support not described in the inclusion criteria and/or social support is not within participants' immediate settings (e.g., online).

[a] 'Substantial' is operationalised as studies in which at least 50% of participants are gender diverse and within the target age range, and where data or quotes can be clearly attributed to the target group.

Table 2

Spider tool

SPIDER domain	Inclusion criteria
Sample	Participants aged (≤25 years) who are transgender and/or gender diverse meaning that their gender identity differs to sex assigned at birth.
Phenomenon of Interest	Experiences and perceptions of social support or lack of social support, and the relationship with participant's mental health.
Design	Published literature which contains substantial qualitative data on the phenomenon of interest which can be

	extracted.
Evaluation	Experiences and perceptions.
Research type	Qualitative studies and mixed methods studies.

In line with a recent review evaluating the impact of social support on LGBTQ adolescents' mental health (McDonald, 2018), the following types of social support were considered for this review: social support networks which included school, family, peers, other adults or advisors and support groups. Social support was considered within the context of Bronfenbrenner's microsystem (1994) which is composed of individuals or groups within participants' immediate setting (e.g., home, school, support groups). The microsystem was chosen because this is where social support is most directly experienced and negotiated. Mental health was defined as a state of mind that includes emotional wellbeing, good behavioural adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, the ability to establish constructive relationships, and the ability to cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life (American Psychological Association; APA, 2018). These definitions of social support and mental health were operationalised in the keywords which were used in the search. To ensure a comprehensive review, no studies were excluded on the basis of quality criteria, especially as the quantity of available studies was not expected to be large.

Search strategy

A comprehensive and inclusive search strategy was developed through preliminary scoping searches and in consultation with a university librarian and research supervisors. Scoping searches were conducted across multiple databases to confirm the availability of relevant studies, refine the scope of the review, and

inform the search terms and final search strategy. The SPIDER tool (Table 2) structured and informed this process.

The final formal search involved using the finalised search terms (Table 3) to search Scopus, PsychINFO, CINAHL and ASSIA on the 30th March 2025. These databases were selected to maximise coverage. This search identified 4, 272 articles which was reduced to 2,829 once duplicates were removed. Forwards and backwards citation of articles included in the review identified a further two articles for inclusion.

Table 3

Search Syntaxes

Concept	Search terms
Gender diverse	"transgender person*" OR "gender expansive" OR transfeminin* OR transmasculin* OR transgender* OR transsex* OR gender-variant OR genderqueer OR "gender divers*" OR "gender-divers*" OR "gender minority" OR "gender dysphor*" OR "gender nonconforming" OR "gender non-conforming" OR TGNC OR "two-spirit" OR crossgender* OR "Non-Binary" OR "non binary" OR "gender fluid*" OR AMAB OR AFAB
Social support	"social support" OR "social connect*" OR "social network" OR "support network" OR "social integration" OR "school connect*" OR "adult support" OR "family connect*" OR "peer* support" OR "partner support" OR "romantic partner support" OR "intimate partner support" OR "community network*" OR "community connect*" OR "support group" OR "LGBT* group" OR "family support" OR "practical support" OR "information* support" OR "family network" OR "support network" OR "social capital" OR "chosen famil*" OR "formal support" OR "informal support" OR "emotional support" OR "psychosocial support" OR "perceived social support" OR "parent* support" OR "care-giver support" OR "care giver support"
Mental health	"mental health" OR "mental illness" OR "psychological wellbeing" OR "psychological well-being" OR "emotional wellbeing" OR "emotional well-being" OR stress OR anxiety OR anxious OR depress* OR suicid* OR wellbeing OR "well-being" OR resilien* OR "behavio* adjustment" OR "disabling symptom*" OR "constructive relationship*" OR cope OR coping OR stresses OR "demands of life"

Screening

All articles identified through the database searches were exported into Rayyan software, which removed duplicates and aided the screening of articles. This software also enabled a second independent reviewer to conduct a blinded co-screen of 7% of articles (n = 198), with no discrepancies identified. Using the predefined inclusion criteria, articles were initially screened by title and abstract, with remaining articles assessed through full-text review to identify eligibility.

During full-text screening, careful consideration was given to studies which included participants from broader groups (e.g., LGBTQ+ populations or wider age ranges). Articles were excluded if the target participants comprised less than 50% of the sample, if it was unclear which data or quotes pertained to the target group, or if participants discussed social support without addressing its impact on mental health. Studies were excluded if they were inaccessible through the researcher's library access. Inclusion decisions were reviewed and discussed with the researcher's supervisor to promote consistency.

Data extraction

Eligible articles (*n*=17) were imported into NVivo and data from the results/findings sections relevant to the research question were extracted. This included participant quotes and author's descriptions and interpretations. Data deemed clearly irrelevant (e.g., social support outside Bronfenbrenner's microsystem) were not coded.

Data synthesis

Thematic synthesis was conducted by the researcher according to the three iterative stages outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008): line-by-line coding, developing descriptive themes and generating analytical themes. A total of 800 codes were generated, with coding kept close to the original text to retain participants' meanings (See Appendix A). The descriptive themes were developed by iteratively grouping similar codes and capturing shared meaning across studies (Appendix B). This process resulted in five descriptive themes and a total of 31 subthemes (Appendix C). The descriptive themes were then examined to discern five analytical themes that generated new insights relating to the research question (Appendix D). This process was discussed between the researcher and research supervisor to check interpretations within the context of the original study results.

Quality assessment

The quality of included studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme qualitative research checklist (CASP, 2024; Appendix E). The CASP checklist does not provide a scoring system, and so a judgment was applied which detailed 'low', 'moderate' or 'high' concerns based on strengths and limitations across the CASP domains. This approach is consistent with Cochrane recommended practice (Noyles et al, 2018) and guidance for the quality assessment of qualitative research for systematic review (Caroll & Booth, 2015). Studies were rated as 'low', 'moderate', or 'high' concern depending on whether methodological limitations were considered to be minor, notable, or major, respectively. A second independent reviewer assessed a subset of articles (n=25%) to ensure consistency. All disagreements were minor and resolved through discussion.

To promote transparent and comprehensive reporting, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses' (PRISMA; Page et al, 2021) Checklist was used alongside the Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research (ENTREQ; Tong et al, 2012) checklist, identifying where each item is addressed in this report (Appendix F).

Researcher reflexivity

Reflexivity is important in qualitative research because it requires the researcher to consider how their own assumptions, identities and positions shape the production and interpretation of knowledge (Barrett et al, 2020; Dodgson, 2019). Transparency about these influences enhances trustworthiness by making the perspectives and contextual factors that inform the analytical process known.

I am a cisgender queer woman in my 30s and recognise that my interest in social justice has likely influenced my interest in this research. My work in a Gender Identity Service has given me professional experience and a natural investment in understanding the challenges and resilience of this community. To support rigour, transparency and reflexivity, a reflective log was kept throughout the research process, alongside discussions with my research supervisor.

Results

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines were followed (PRISMA, Moher et al, 2009; see Figure 1). Study characteristics of the 17 included articles are summarised in Table 4. The qualitative (n=14) and multi-method studies with extractable qualitative data (n=3) were published between 2005 and 2025, in the United States (n=8), United Kingdom

(*n*=3), India (*n*=1), Australia (*n*=2), Turkey (*n*=1), Canada (*n*=2). The studies included

a total of 488 gender diverse youth aged 11-25, representing a wide range of gender

identities (e.g., transgender, non-binary, genderqueer). The reporting of ethnicity data

was highly variable across the studies, with 12 studies reporting extractable data.

White participants constituted the majority across these studies, while participants

from Black, Asian, Lantinx, Indigenous, Middle Eastern and mixed-ethnicity groups

were represented in comparatively small numbers. Interviews were a substantial

component of data collection in most studies (*n*=15). Five studies included data from

broader groups (LGBT, broader age range), and care was taken to extract only the

data relevant to the target population.

Figure 1

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) Diagram of the Study Selection Process
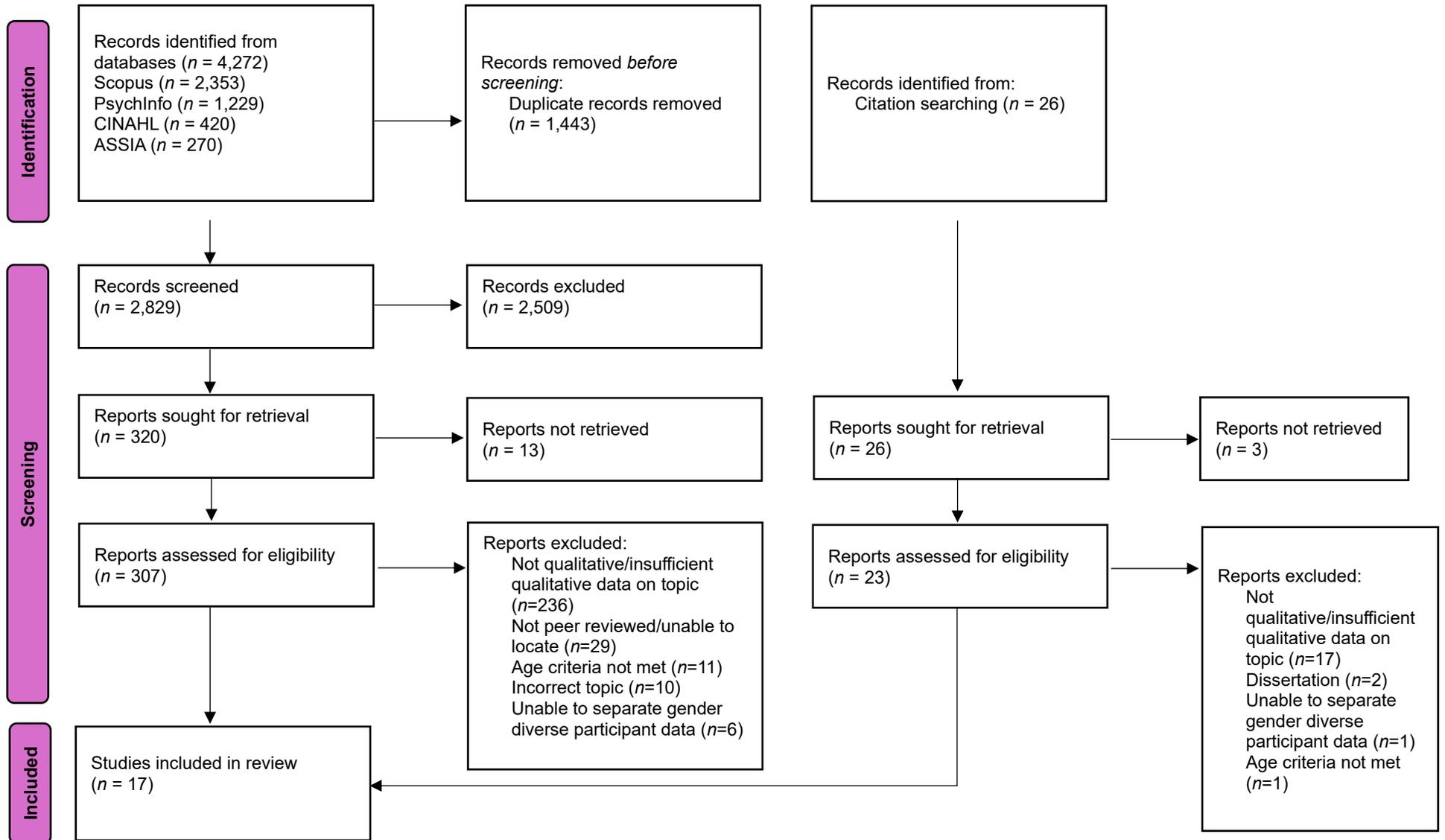

Identification

Records identified from databases (*n* = 4,272)
Scopus (*n* = 2,353)
PsychInfo (*n* = 1,229)
CINAHL (*n* = 420)
ASSIA (*n* = 270)

Records removed *before screening*:
Duplicate records removed (*n* = 1,443)

Records identified from:
Citation searching (*n* = 26)

Screening

Records screened (*n* = 2,829)

Records excluded (*n* = 2,509)

Reports sought for retrieval (*n* = 320)

Reports not retrieved (*n* = 13)

Reports sought for retrieval (*n* = 26)

Reports not retrieved (*n* = 3)

Reports assessed for eligibility (*n* = 307)

Reports excluded:
Not qualitative/insufficient qualitative data on topic (*n*=236)
Not peer reviewed/unable to locate (*n*=29)
Age criteria not met (*n*=11)
Incorrect topic (*n*=10)
Unable to separate gender diverse participant data (*n*=6)

Reports assessed for eligibility (*n* = 23)

Reports excluded:
Not qualitative/insufficient qualitative data on topic (*n*=17)
Dissertation (*n*=2)
Unable to separate gender diverse participant data (*n*=1)
Age criteria not met (*n*=1)

Included

Studies included in review (*n* = 17)

Table 4

Summary of the Study Characteristics

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
Andrzejewski et al (2021)	United States	To explore transgender youths' experiences of parental support, map these onto the social support framework (emotional, instrumental, appraisal, and informational), and understand how this support contributes to positive health outcomes.	33 'racially diverse' gender diverse youth (ages 16-25): • 17 transgender women • 11 transgender men • 8 non-binary, gender nonconforming, gender fluid or agender	Recruitment through seven urban community-based organisations that serve transgender youth.	Qualitative interview study using thematic analysis.	• Semi-structured interviews collected as part of the Resilience and Transgender Youth Study. • 37-150 minutes.	• A multistage coding process was used, beginning with the development of a codebook based on the research questions. A subset of parent and caregiver-related data were then coded and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and informed by the social support framework (i.e., emotional, instrumental, appraisal and informational). • Coding was conducted by multiple coders, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.	• Most participants received general parental support. • Gender identity specific support was valued but often limited and inconsistent. Support sometimes increased over time. • Parents often lacked knowledge about gender identity. • General support without gender-specific support could be harmful. • Gender-affirming support was protective for wellbeing.	Moderate concerns
Barras & Jones (2024)	United Kingdom	To understand how parental support impacts quality of life from the perspective of gender diverse youth, and explore barriers and facilitators to affirming parental support.	140 gender diverse youth (ages 11-19): • 48.6% male • 25.7% female • 20.7% non-binary • 4.3% other	Adverts were placed on online forums and social media platforms for the UK charity Mermaids, who support gender diverse youth and	Multi-methods design encompassing quantitative and qualitative elements within a single online survey. Interpretivist	• Online survey with open ended questions.	• Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) thematic analysis. Codes were agreed between two authors.	• Parental support described as inconsistent, conditional and often conflicting (e.g., express verbal acceptance but not take affirmative action), which negatively impacted wellbeing. • Limited knowledge and understanding was a barrier to parental support. Parental attitudes often shifted as they became more informed.	Moderate concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
			• 0.7% prefer not to say	their families.	ontology was used.			• Partial support had some protective effect, but only when there were genuine attempts to affirm.	
Bhattacharyya & Rakesh (2025)	India	To identify and explore how social, political and legal factors impact the wellbeing and the quality of life of the LGBT community in India.	10 LGBT youth (ages 18-25): • 6 were transgender or non-binary	Adverts were circulated on various social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram). Snowball sampling was used.	Qualitative interview study using thematic analysis.	• Semi-structured interviews. • 60-100 minutes.	• Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Codes and themes were reviewed by two qualitative researchers who were members of the LGBT community.	• Wellbeing was strongly interlinked with social support from family and peers. Having at least one supportive family member was protective of mental health. Financial dependence hindered openness. •Supportive peers were critical for self-exploration, wellbeing and cushioning against unsupportive family. Identity disclosure was felt to be safer than with family. • Support from LGBTQ+ community not guaranteed.	Moderate concerns
Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black (2019)	United States	To understand what institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences result in trans students leaving college and how these experiences reflect gender minority stress.	14 trans youth (ages 19-28): • 6 trans men • 3 trans women • 5 non-binary or gender queer • 13 participants were aged 19-25	Participants contacted who took part in a previous survey of students.	Qualitative interview study using thematic analysis.	• Semi-structured interviews. • About one hour in length.	• Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Multiple coders and intercoder agreement of 88, then 98% after discussion.	• Cisnormativity in institutions created chronic stress and hypervigilance, and negative interpersonal experiences reduced sense of belonging. • Family rejection destabilised emotional wellbeing. • LGBT groups not sufficiently trans inclusive. • Cultivating community support was protective. Trans people shared knowledge about which educators were safe.	Moderate concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
Hill, Perry, Lin & Ohan (2025)	Australia	To understand trans youth's experienced and anticipated stigma.	20 trans youth (ages 14-18): • 6 non-binary • 2 non-binary man/transmasculine non-binary/genderqueer • 6 male • 3 transgender man/trans male/demiboy • 1 transgender woman • 2 figuring it out/no label	Adverts were circulated via social media, community organisations and word of mouth.	Qualitative interview study using thematic analysis and a phenomenological lens.	• Semi-structured interviews. • 18-61 minutes.	• Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The first author led coding and theme development, and theme refinement was completed collaboratively by co-authors.	• Social support, especially from peers acted as a buffer that helped youth to cope with experienced and anticipated stigma. • Family support was deeply important but inconsistently available, creating emotional vulnerability. • Unsolicited social support was powerful and reduced fear of stigma.	Low concerns
Johnson et al (2020a)	United States	To explore how non-binary adolescents uniquely experience minority stress and non-affirmation and how this impacts mental health.	14 'ethnically diverse' non-binary youth (ages 16-20)	Participants were recruited via a larger multisite study using purposeful venue-based sampling, and the rest through clinics, nonprofit organisations serving	Qualitative interviews which incorporated lifeline methodology and photo elicitation.	Data collection were completed over two phases. • Phase 1 – Lifeline methodology and qualitative interview (n=14). • Phase 2 – Photo	• Data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000). • A codebook was developed using a priori theory-driven codes and themes from the transcripts. • Iterative coding by 3 coders. • A third transcripts double-coded.	• Lack of reliable social support due to identity invalidation across interpersonal, community and institutional contexts. • Emotional labour of educating others, leading many to avoid disclosure. • LGBTQ spaces not consistently safe or affirming. • Failure of adequate support from educational institutions (e.g., frequent misgendering).	Moderate concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
				trans youth via social media and email.		elicitation and qualitative interview (n=10). • Interviews lasted 1-2 hours. • 4 participants did not complete phase 2.		• Inconsistent social support increased confusion, rumination, and self-doubt, with cumulative effects contributing to anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.	
Johnson et al (2020b)	United States	To understand the conditions in which trans youth perceive parental behaviours as supportive, rejecting or mixed and to describe the psychosocial consequences.	24 'ethnically diverse' trans youth (ages 16-20): • 13 used gender neutral pronouns • 11 used binary gender pronouns	Participants were recruited via a larger ongoing project and through local clinics and nonprofit organisations serving trans youth via fliers, presentations, social media and emails.	Qualitative interviews which incorporated lifeline methodology and photo elicitation, and thematic analysis.	Data collection were completed over two phases. • Phase 1 – Lifeline methodology and qualitative interview (n=24) (2-3 hours). • Phase 2 – Photo elicitation and qualitative interview	• Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). • A codebook was developed using a priori theory-driven codes and themes from the transcripts. • Iterative coding by 3 coders. • A third transcripts double-coded.	• Rejecting behaviours (e.g., non affirmation) have negative mental health impact and were linked to internalised shame, and reliance on peers. It can also mean distancing from parents. • Supportive behaviours (e.g., identity affirmation, self-education) improved mental health. • Mixed behaviours caused confusion and emotional conflict. • Parental behaviours often improved over time.	Low concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
						(n=19) (1-2 hours). • 5 participants did not complete phase 2.			
Jones et al (2024)	United Kingdom	To explore how trans youth experience family belonging and support and the perceived psychosocial experiences (e.g., mental health associated with this.	27 trans youth (ages 16-25)	Adverts were circulated on social media and by UK support organisations serving LGBTQ+ youth.	Multi-methods design encompassing quantitative and qualitative elements. The qualitative element involved interviews. A realist perspective was used.	• Semi-structured interviews. • 34-114 minutes.	• Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022) and theoretically guided by the Social Identity Approach to Health (SIAH). • One researcher completed coding and analysis.	• Family support is important, but often experienced as partial, inconsistent or unavailable. • Both concealment and disclosure of gender identity had significant psychological costs. • Many youth rely on chosen family with lived experience as primary sources of belonging and mental health support.	Low concerns
Karakısla et al (2024)	Turkey	To explore the life experiences and perspectives of transgender men in Turkey.	15 transgender men (ages 20-35): • 9 participants ages 20-25	Transgender support groups were approached via social media.	Interviews and grounded theory methodology were used.	• Semi-structured interviews. • 30-40 minutes.	• Data were analysed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). • During the creation of coding and categories feedback was sought from an independent researcher.	• Family acceptance or rejection shaped participants wellbeing and sense of safety. Participants described social withdrawal, resulting in isolation and suicidal ideation. • Rejection and lack of understanding were common and harmful. Even limited acceptance had a positive impact.	Moderate concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
Kelley et al (2022)	Canada	To explore the ways in which transgender and non-binary youths' lived experiences, access to gender affirmation, and the challenges experienced at school impact their wellbeing.	12 transgender and non-binary youth (ages 15-17): • 2 trans female • 4 trans male • 6 non-binary	Recruitment took place via community organisations via paper poster and flyers and online.	This data was gathered as part of a larger project and selected according to the aims of the project. Qualitative interviews and thematic analysis were used.	• Interviews. • ~ 2 hours.	• Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) • Sections related to school experiences were extracted from the interviews and coded by a researcher. Themes were discussed with a non-binary consultant, and the whole process was supervised by experienced co-authors.	• Mental health was shaped by the degree of social support and validation received at school. • Schools that lacked understanding of gender diversity contributed to stress and identity invalidation, while active support and validation from staff protected and enhanced wellbeing. • Supportive peers enhanced wellbeing, whereas rejection and bullying were deeply harmful and had serious mental health consequences.	Moderate concerns
Morgan et al (2023)	Australia	To explore trans youth perceptions of parent reactions to gender identity disclosure and the barriers and facilitators regarding parental understanding and support.	14 trans youth (ages 14-23): • 8 trans male • 3 trans female • 2 non-binary • 1 genderqueer	Recruitment via an existing LGBTQA+ youth reference group established by the research team through partner organisations and social media.	Qualitative interview study using content analysis (general inductive approach).	• Semi structured interviews. • ~1 hour.	• Data were analysed using a General Inductive Approach (GIA). • Member checking was completed at interview conclusion. • ~50% of dataset were cross-checked by the second author.	• Parental support is a major protective factor for mental health. • Lack of parental support has significant adverse mental health impacts and rejection led some to distance themselves from parents as a protective mechanism. • Non-affirmation of identity increases mental health risks, sometimes leading to crisis. • Peer connection and community buffered distress. • Good quality information improved parental support, which improved youth wellbeing. Burden of educating experienced by youth.	Moderate concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
								• Parent support frequently improved over time.	
Morrow & McGuire (2024)	United States	To understand the relationship between housing insecurity and suicidality.	30 transgender youth (ages 15-26): • 29 participants ages 15-25	Recruitment took place through community centres, via youth group leaders, transgender listservs and snowball sampling.	This study was a secondary qualitative analysis. Qualitative interviews and Qualitative Content Analysis were used.	• Semi structured interviews. • 90-120 minutes.	• Data were analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier, 2012). • During coding discussion was sought with the primary interviewer regarding interpretation until the researchers reached a consensus about the analysis. • Feeback was sought by experts in the field regarding the analysis process.	• Family conflict was central to mental health struggles. Family rejection or disaffirmation rather than homelessness appeared to be the primary driver of suicidal ideation. • Social support was protective only when it was affirming. • Chosen family were often described as more emotionally reliable than family of origin. • Leaving disaffirming homes often improved mental health.	Low concerns
Muzzey et al (2022)	United States	To explore why chosen name is important for transmasculine and non-binary youth's mental health and what support networks exist and how they function during the transition of changing name.	12 transmasculine and nonbinary youth (ages 18-25): • 3 transmasculine • 9 non-binary	Recruitment via social media platforms.	Qualitative interview study using thematic content analysis.	• Semi structured interviews.	• Data were analysed using thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi et al, 2016). • Two researchers independently coded the data then compared coding and reached consensus on the final network categories.	• Chosen family and friends provided the strongest and most reliable emotional support. • Families of origin provided mixed and often strained support which increased stress. • Emotional labour of educating families of origin. • When families did use chosen name it enhanced wellbeing. • LGBTQ+ community groups were desired by often inaccessible.	Low concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
Robinson et al (2024)	United States	How does support from similarly marginalised LGBTQ peers shape mental health from the perspective of LGBTQ youth?	83 LGBT youth (ages 16-19): • 50 were gender diverse	Participants were recruited through an online pre-screening survey disseminated via a strong social media presence, targeted Instagram advertisements, and distribution by local LGBTQ organisations.	Qualitative interviews were part of a larger longitudinal study.	• Semi-structured interviews. • ~90-120 minutes.	• Data analysis involved flexible coding (Deterding and Waters 2021), thematic analysis and axial coding.	• Gender diverse youth described LGBTQ friendships as a crucial source of mental health support, particularly when family were unsupportive. • Parental conflict led to fear and withdrawal, and chosen family stepped into these familial roles. • Shared experiences of dysphoria offered shared understanding and experiential knowledge sharing as well as emotional validation. • Chosen family also offered instrumental support (e.g., housing). • Some cisgender peers lacked understanding and were invalidating.	Moderate concerns
Sansfaçon et al (2020)	Canada	To understand the individual and social factors that support trans youths' resilience and wellbeing, and to identify oppressive forces that harm wellbeing and how resistance and oppression processes interact.	24 trans youth (ages 15-25)	Recruitment took place via community partners via posters and social media. Diversity sampling was used.	Qualitative interviews were part of a larger multi-stage research project. A combination of Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR)	• Semi-structured interviews.	• Data were analysed using Grounded Theory (Dick, 2007). • Trans youth, Graduate Research Assistants and community partners contributed throughout the process, consistent with the CBPAR framework.	• Affirming support from family, friends, romantic partners, peers and community spaces plays a crucial role in enhancing wellbeing, while rejection, anticipated rejection and non-affirmation are harmful for mental health. • Family support can help buffer the stress of negative treatment in other settings, however rejection or even neutrality can undermine wellbeing.	Moderate concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
					and Grounded Theory methodologies were used.			• Peers and romantic relationships were a source of emotional resilience through understanding and affirmation. • Anticipated rejection was harmful to mental health. • Community spaces can be sources of validation but also sometimes, risk. • Teachers and peers in school can bolster as well as undermine confidence.	
Weinhardt et al (2019)	United States	To examine how social support and resilience relate to the wellbeing of transgender youth, and to explore how transgender youth define and experience support in their lives.	8 transgender youth (ages 14-17): • 3 transgender • 2 non-binary/gender fluid • 3 with multiple gender identities	Recruitment took place via camp counsellors at a leadership development camp for LGBT youth.	Multi-methods design encompassing quantitative and qualitative elements. The qualitative element comprised a focus group and thematic analysis.	• A single semi-structured focus group. • ~2 hours.	• Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2016). • Codes and themes were agreed via consensus between both researchers.	• Participants distinguished acceptance from support - support is acceptance plus action. • Taking supportive steps involves taking purposeful concrete actions (e.g., correct pronouns). • Youth build their own support network as support wasn't always available from family. • Youth described inconsistent, unreliable and conditional support, and participants developed self-reliance to cope with this.	Moderate concerns
Wilson, Griffin & Wren (2005)	United Kingdom	To explore how gender diverse youth interact with their peers in secondary school.	8 transgender youth (ages 14-17):	Recruitment took place through the Gender Identity Developmen	Qualitative interview study using thematic analysis.	• Semi-structured interviews.	• Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Smith, 1995). • One transcript was coded independently by the lead	• Lack of social support contributed to distress and poor mental health.	Moderate concerns

Author (year)	Country	Aim	Participants	Setting	Methodology	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings	CASP rating
			• 6 trans female • 2 trans male	t Unit in the UK.			author and an Assistant Psychologist which related in 77.8% inter-coder reliability.	• Supportive peer relationships provided emotional protection. • Fear of losing social support increased stress and meant reluctance to disclose. • Disclosure to supportive individuals provided affirmation.	

Quality appraisal

An overview of the methodological rigor of the articles, as assessed by the CASP checklist, is summarised in Table 4 (see Appendix G for detailed summary). Twelve articles were rated as having moderate concerns and five as having low concerns. Overall, the articles demonstrated clear and well-justified aims, employed appropriate methodologies and presented findings clearly with supporting quotes. The most frequent limitations concerned limited reflexivity, insufficient exploration of researcher positioning, and a lack of transparency regarding epistemological stance (Barrett et al, 2020; Dodgson, 2019). Several studies provided limited details on ethical considerations, and some studies lacked depth in their reporting of methodological details.

Thematic synthesis

The thematic synthesis of 17 studies generated 800 codes which were organised into 5 descriptive themes encompassing a total of 31 subthemes which spanned family, peer and educational contexts. Appendix H provides the full set of descriptive themes and identifies which articles contributed to each theme. From the descriptive themes, five analytical themes were generated which extended beyond the primary studies to provide new insights relevant to the research question. The following section presents the five analytical themes.

Support must contain active ingredient: the protective power of affirmation

Gender diverse youth consistently emphasised that support being active and affirming, was crucial for benefiting mental health. Participants made a clear distinction between verbal acceptance alone, and genuine active affirmation,

suggesting that anything less than explicit, proactive support failed to effectively buffer stress, and in some cases could be actively detrimental.

Across most studies, participants emphasised the importance of having their gender identities recognised and validated, and then this followed up with tangible action:

> support is acceptance with actions…When I came out, my mom was like, I accept you, I still love you, whatever, all that stuff. But that's definitely not the same thing as supporting me. Now she is starting to support me, by you know, using my correct pronouns, talking about hormone therapy (Weinhardt et al, 2019; p.319).

Studies indicated that "actions speak louder than words" and lack of action left participants feeling ignored: "while he appears on the surface to support me, he refuses to substantiate that with facilitating any actual steps towards my transition, no matter how much I plead" (Barras & Jones, 2024, p.94). One participant described the lack of affirmative action following disclosure of their gender identity to their family as "negative neutrality" in which "I was not threatened to be kicked out the house….but it was not positive either…They are not openly opposed to my identity, they don't absolutely deny it. But there is no factual or perceived support", which had a negative impact on wellbeing (Sansfaçon et al, 2020; p.193).

Study participants described various ways in which affirmative action was enacted by others, including using their chosen name and pronouns, active listening, asking gentle curious questions about their gender experience, supporting access to gender affirming care, and advocating for them during interactions: "my mom is a

really outspoken person…when someone does something or says something shitty she's immediately on it…She has become a cis ally in the best kind of way" (Johnson et al, 2020b; p.163). Participants appreciated being offered choice and autonomy regarding their gender identity:

> one of the teachers saw that I crossed my dead name out on my badge and….she was like, "Oh, would you like us to change your name on the roll?" and I was like, "That'd be great but I don't want my parents knowing. So could you maybe just let the teachers know?" and they're like, "That's awesome. We'll just let the teachers know," and it was great, and everyone was awesome about it (Hill et al, 2025, p.11).

Across studies, participants described how tangible affirmative social support reduced distress, shame and isolation and improved their sense of belonging, self-worth and authenticity. The authors in one study noted: "A young participant described at length how having a first romantic relationship where he was recognized and affirmed as a man enhanced his self-worth and allowed him to share his feelings and obtain support" (Sansfaçon et al, 2020; p.193).

Hill and colleagues (2025) reported that "nothing other than full and committed support was trusted by participants. Poor or variable support from an individual or organization meant participants continued to anticipate stigma" (p.11), while active and unprompted support helped participants to feel safe.

Taken together, these findings suggest that verbal acceptance alone is insufficient to buffer anticipated stigma, and that the protective impact of social

support appears to arise from active and consistent affirmation, which signals safety and reduces anticipated stigma.

Support that isn't safe: ambivalent, conditional and variable support

This theme captures the complex and dynamic nature of social support, illustrating how harmful effects on mental health can emerge not only from overt rejection but also from ambivalent, conditional or inconsistent support which appears to undermine protective aspects of social support.

Studies highlighted that denial or rejection of youths' gender identity was detrimental to their mental health (e.g., depression, suicidal ideation, loneliness): "After I disclosed my situation, everything was over. After that, I began to isolate myself at home, and my family began discussing preventing me from going to school. Then I attempted suicide" (Karakisla et al, 2024, p.911). Importantly, however, participants across studies emphasised that social support was often not "black or white" (Barras & Jones, 2024, p.96) describing "complexities in the ways that support can be delivered" (Jones et al, 2024; p.9). They highlighted a "shading of the grey space between the barrier/facilitatory binary tropes of either unconditional support/no-support" (Barras & Jones, 2024, p.96). Often support was described as unstable, unpredictable and inconsistent, fluctuating between present and absent.

Inconsistent parental support created conflict and confusion, leaving youth feeling unworthy and isolated, which negatively impacted their quality of life (Barras & Jones, 2024). One participant described experiencing both support and shame: "he tries his best and can be supportive, but at times I feel he is ashamed of me and struggles to talk about me to anyone outside of the family" (Barras & Jones, 2024,

p.94). Another noted that even well-intentioned attempts at parental protection could still have harmful effects:

> I think it's just a lack of understanding or that extreme maternal caution for your welfare and safety, "Okay, don't tell your friends because what if someone finds out? I support you, but maybe you're too young to know." Which really hurt, but I knew that that is also just from a lack of knowing. (Morgan et al, 2023; p.7).

Several studies highlighted the importance of perceived parent intentions in shaping how inconsistencies were experienced. Many participants expressed compassion and focussed on their parents' willingness to learn, which buffered the distress of being misgendered or deadnamed (e.g., Barras & Jones, 2024).

Some studies highlighted that gender diverse youth often felt invalidated within LGBTQ+ spaces, describing the need to "be doubly on edge" (Johnson et al, 2020a; p.226). One non-binary participant shared that:

> you can't necessarily feel totally safe in trans environments either. Like, binary trans people, they have each other. But if I walk into a room full of binary trans people, I don't know if they all think that non-binary genders are valid or if they think that any of that is really trans (Johnson et al, 2020a; p.226).

Another participant shared that even in schools considered "progressive" and the "best school [in this area] to be trans" nonbinary identities were regularly undermined (Johnson et al, 2020a; p.227). These patterns demonstrate that, even in social contexts which are presumed to be safer or more inclusive, social support is

neither guaranteed nor dependable, which cultivated stress and undermined safety and belonging (Sansfaçon et al, 2020).

Across multiple studies, conditional parental support was identified as harmful, with financial dependence frequently highlighted as a way in which parents exerted control over participants' gender expressions. For example, one participant described the emotional and financial stress they experienced when their parent agreed to provide half of the cost of college tuition but only if she didn't pursue transition (Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019). Although youth strongly desired unconditional support from their family, they rarely expected it (Hill et al, 2025). This pattern further emphasises that support for gender diverse youth was often uncertain and couldn't be taken for granted.

Several studies suggested that parent support often improved over time and that access to good quality knowledge facilitated this improvement:

It takes time. I knew I would be safe, but I don't feel supported. It just took time. I mean it's rough getting misgendered by your parents for 2 years. I knew my mom, I knew that I wouldn't have an issue, even though it was scary. But it just took time (Weinhardt et al, 2019, p.321).

This suggests that access to accurate knowledge is crucial for enabling parents to provide consistent and effective support.

Overall, studies suggest that mental health is undermined not only by outright rejection or denial of gender diverse youth's identity, but also by ambivalent, conditional or inconsistent support.

The hidden cost of social support

This theme illustrates that social support outside of chosen family (explored further in the final theme) was rarely experienced as a freely offered resource, rather, participants often had to invest emotional labour to maintain or strengthen it, which had negative consequences for their mental health. The burden of support was particularly pronounced when it was ambivalent, conditional or inconsistent.

Across studies, participants appeared to assume considerable responsibility for managing their parents' emotional responses and for educating them, particularly after disclosing their gender identity. Many described a sense of responsibility to reassure and guide their parents through confusion, shock and fear during periods when youth themselves were highly distressed: "she thought it was her fault, it took a lot for me not to get overly emotional and try and stay strong and reassure her that, "This isn't your fault. You haven't done anything" (Morgan et al, 2023; p.8). Another participant described internalising negative feelings about himself: "For a long time, I wouldn't let myself be who I was, because [my mom] made me feel so guilty. Like, I was hurting so many people, just by being trans" (Johnson et al, 2020b; p.162)

Participants in many studies understood limited family support within a broader context of their families' limited understanding of gender identity (e.g., Barras & Jones, 2024). Several studies highlighted the burden placed on participants to educate their families (Muzzey et al, 2022, p.656):

it's very clear the biggest issue for parents is a lack of understanding. I've basically been educating my parents on what this is at every point of the way

and that's so tiring on top of everything else you're dealing with (Morgan et al,

2023; p.9).

This suggests that a lack of knowledge both constrained parental support and

placed emotional labour on youth, which negatively impacted on wellbeing through

exhaustion and cumulative stress (Muzzey et al, 2022).

The need to educate others extended beyond families and into educational

institutions and peer relationships. Participants frequently described educating peers

and staff, as well as managing invasive questions:

when trans stuff comes up, everybody turns and looks at you. The more I felt I

had to educate my peers, the more visible I was. That wound up contributing

a lot of stress – this need to always [be] an educator when I was there to be

educated (Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019, p.390).

The constant expectation "to have to explain pretty much my entire identity,

unless I cover it up" was described as "a lose-lose situation", contributing to

exhaustion and overwhelm (Johnson et al, 2020a; p.229). One participant described

not talking to his supportive friend in school in case he might get bullied (Wilson et al,

2005). This continual expenditure of energy generated chronic stress, thereby

undermining participants' mental health.

In some studies, the substantial emotional and psychological costs associated

with certain forms of social support meant that participants actively declined

instrumental support in order to protect their mental health. Several accounts

described youth refusing conditional financial support or choosing to leave home

when parental support was experienced as harmful or coercive. Notably, some

participants perceived homelessness as a safer option than remaining with their family, which appeared to mitigate the risk of suicidality (Morrow & McGuire, 2024). These findings highlight the complex trade-offs between physical and emotional safety that gender diverse youth often face.

Taken together, studies suggest that accessing social support often entails substantial costs for gender diverse youth, which can be detrimental to their mental health.

High risk, uncertain reward: safety and strategy in accessing support

This theme illustrates how gender diverse youth continuously assess risk, navigate social support strategically, and develop coping strategies in contexts where accessing support can be unpredictable and potentially harmful. Unlike the previous theme, which focuses on the hidden emotional costs of support once accessed, this theme emphasises the uncertainty and potential harm of seeking social support as an openly gender diverse young person.

Across most studies, participants described making continuous cost-benefit assessments when deciding whether, when and from whom to seek support. Many participants across studies concealed their gender identity as a form of self-protection, to maintain family identification and access to existing support:

> I know the reaction is going to be negative and it's going to be difficult and I'm not in the right space or frame of mind to deal with that at the moment. I think it would be detrimental to me. I think it would be detrimental to our relationship. I think like it would make my Mum's and I relationship worse even though it isn't great (Jones et al, 2024, p.8).

Participants also highlighted the risk of losing friendships upon disclosure, leading many to conceal their gender identity in the context of peer support (Wilson et al, 2005). Concealment was described as a double-edged sword, as it was simultaneously a source of protection and harm: "I try to hide the fact that I'm trans and that's not awesome. It makes me feel like anxious all the time because I'm trying to hide something. It feels like I'm lying." (Hill et al, 2025; p.9). One participant highlighted the painful trade-off between safety and authenticity: "it's either I hide myself, and I feel negatively about myself and my own image, or I have to put myself in the spotlight, and that visually shows everyone that, "Oh, you're trans", it's a beacon on my head" (Hill et al, 2025; p.9). Several studies described the psychological distress, cognitive burden and isolation associated with concealment (Jones et al, 2024).

Studies highlighted how anticipated stigma and prior experiences of rejection shaped the way participants navigated social support. For many, prior experiences of harm constrained youths' actions and limited opportunities for affirmation:

> I never really tried to use my pronouns, because I was scared to ask them. Because coming from my family not being supportive, I was like "Wow, I'm really being discriminated against. I have to protect myself" …I guess I was just worried that [my teachers] would be like "What?" And I didn't want to have to go through and explain. It's exhausting. And at that point I was so emotionally tired (Johnson et al, 2020a; p.229).

Several studies highlighted how structural aspects of educational institutions further reminded participants of their marginalised status, which likely influenced youth's strategic decisions about whether and how to seek support (Goldberg,

Kuvalanka & Black, 2019). Given that active and affirming support appears to be a primary pathway through which social support benefits mental health, these societal and institutional barriers curtail crucial opportunities for protective support (Kelley et al, 2022).

Across studies, participants described hypervigilance when assessing whether seeking support or disclosing their identity was likely to result in affirmation or rejection. Some participants looked out for specific markers which indicated higher risk of stigma such as religiosity, older age and strictly enforced gender binaries (Hill et al, 2025). Participants described the challenge of always wondering if others would reject them if they disclosed their gender identity: "knowing in the back of my brain, they possibly might have something against me, and I don't know how I deal with that" (Hill et al, 2025; p.9). Youth perceived support as the exception and that stigma was to be expected, emphasising that only clear, unambiguous and particularly unprompted support generated a sense of safety (Hill et al, 2025).

Some studies highlighted that social withdrawal and cultivating self-reliance functioned as protective strategies when social support was absent or unreliable:

> I feel like when you are looking for that support, there are going to be so many people that aren't there for you entirely … and you have to have enough respect for yourself and confidence in who you are to let those people go, and to know that this person is not going to be there when I'm falling off the roof of a building, so I'm not going to rely on them for that (Weinhardt et al, 2019; p.320).

Taken together, these findings show that gender diverse youth invest considerable effort in keeping themselves safe within broader societal contexts marked by stigma and uncertain support. Strategies such as concealment and withdrawal may offer short-term safety by reducing exposure to harm, but they also limit opportunities for connection and affirmation, contributing to isolation and poorer mental health in the long term. To access social support fully, many gender diverse youth require social support networks to feel sufficiently safe to disclose their identity. Furthermore, they must be robust enough to manage the potential challenges and labour associated with others' reactions.

Chosen family: lifeline when primary support systems fail

This theme illustrates the crucial role of chosen family and peer support in protecting gender diverse youth, particularly in buffering mental health risks associated with inconsistent family support and broader societal stigma.

Across studies, gender diverse youth actively constructed their own support networks to compensate for the support they lacked from families of origin (Morrow & McGuire, 2024). Chosen families typically comprised partners, roommates and close friends who had become key sources of family-like support (Muzzey et al, 2022). Youth described relying on chosen family when support from their family of origin or peers was limited, which was protective of their mental health (Muzzey et al, 2022). While accessing support from families of origin often demanded substantial emotional labour, chosen families readily offered emotional support and affirmation (Jones et al, 2024):

she's very supportive in everything that I do and everything that I chose to do [including my transition] …like if I have a hard time or whatever, or anything that I've ever gone through she's always there. Whenever me and my mom get into it, she's there (Morrow & McGuire, 2024; p.219).

These findings suggest that once constructed, chosen family operated as a readily accessible and affirming support system, which improved wellbeing and buffered the negative impact of limited or ambivalent support from other social contexts.

Chosen family were perceived by youth as better equipped than families of origin to provide emotional and practical support, particularly when they had shared lived experience of gender diversity (Jones et al, 2024). Informational support, such as practical advice on how to manage dysphoria, was particularly valuable when gender diverse youth were unable to access gender affirming care due to lack of family support (Robinson et al, 2024). One participant shared:

[my friends] are all part of the community so they all understand, at least at a base level, what my anxieties are with public and dysphoria and stuff like that. And they also have tips that if I'm feeling dysphoric about a certain thing, then they have suggestions on what could make that better (Robinson et al, 2024, p.8).

Across studies, support from chosen family helped to normalise transition experiences, contribute to collective efficacy, enhance belonging, reduce loneliness and build self-esteem. Chosen family offered refuge when family and school relationships were difficult. One participant emphasised the crucial importance of

chosen family in protecting them from peer rejection and facilitating improvement in their mental health:

> I'm not being bullied… if you can get somebody who is kind, who is helpful… who is supportive of your decisions and supportive of you… it plays a major role in helping you, you know, really grow and believe in yourself because no matter how much therapy I've had, things did not start changing until I surrounded myself with better people" (Bhattacharyya & Rakesh, 2025; p.2709).

> Support was often reciprocal: "I feel like we're all very much exploring everything and still learning how to cope" (Robinson et al, 2024, p.10) which enhanced belonging.

In some studies, participants relied on their gender diverse peers to navigate educational institutions safely:

> you have to speak to other trans people, other queer people, to know who's safe.. it's hugely variable depending on the professor… there's almost no official overhead that forces trans competence… it seems very much on individuals to learn and do better, [so] my experience of college has become a lot about…navigating through, like, "Who do my friends know is a good professor? And being very selective about the classes I take" (Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; p.390).

This finding emphasises the importance of locating supportive individuals within broader systems that are not structured to meet the needs of gender diverse youth.

Several studies acknowledged limitations of chosen family, who often cannot provide the same wrap-around care that families of origin are generally expected to offer (Morrow & McGuire, 2024). When chosen family is comprised of other youth, like youth themselves, they typically lack access to resources such as financial security and housing (Robinson et al, 2024). As noted previously, many gender diverse youth lose access to these resources when distancing themselves from inconsistent or conditional support from families of origin in order to protect their mental health (Morrow & McGuire, 2024).

Taken together, chosen family provided crucial affirmative, safe, compensatory support which helped to buffer the mental health risks associated with rejection and inconsistent family support. Chosen family alone were not enough to holistically meet the needs of gender diverse youth.

Discussion

This review synthesised qualitative research to develop a deeper understanding of how social support influences the mental health of gender diverse youth. Across the five analytical themes, the findings indicate that social support is a complex and dynamic process, which is primarily protective through consistent affirming action that feels safe to access. Conversely, support is often experienced as ambivalent or conditional, which not only undermines its protective value but can be actively harmful for young people's mental health. This dynamic creates significant labour, as youth must strategically navigate both accessing and maintaining social support within contexts marked by uncertainty and stigma. Thus, chosen family emerged as a crucial protective resource that buffers some of these harms, although it cannot fully compensate for the shortcomings of other support

systems. This section explores what these findings mean, how they are situated within the existing literature and discusses their implications for clinical practice.

The analytical themes highlight the central role of the microsystem in which youth are embedded (i.e., family, peer groups, educational institutions), in shaping how support is accessed and experienced (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These immediate relational environments are profoundly shaped by broader sociocultural and political factors, which enhance or constrain gender diverse youths' access to safety, affirmation and belonging. The review elucidates key mechanisms through which social support can both improve and worsen mental health, including how support is enacted, how safe interpersonal contexts feel, and the emotional labour required to navigate these dynamics.

The findings highlighted that the perceived quality, consistency and trustworthiness of support, rather than merely its presence or absence shaped its impact on mental health. Within contexts of stigma and anticipated threat which dominate the environments in which support is accessed, partial or verbal acceptance is insufficient, whereas behaviours that communicate genuine recognition help create the relational safety needed for support to function protectively. In contrast, inconsistent support appears to amplify uncertainty and threat, prompting some youth to conceal aspects of themselves or withdraw to reduce the risk of harm. A central distinction emerged between acceptance, which acknowledges identity, and affirmation, which actively upholds it.

The synthesis also illuminates the hidden burden involved in seeking and sustaining support. Youth frequently expend considerable psychological and relational effort evaluating when to disclose, educating others, managing reactions,

and deciding when to step back. Furthermore, while strategies such as concealment or withdrawal may offer short-term protection, they both restrict opportunities to access the connection and affirming support that promotes wellbeing, and are costly in of themselves to youth mental health. Youth work hard to protect themselves from the very environments upon which they depend for support.

Taken together, social support is a heavily effortful and negotiated process rather than a straightforward protective factor, emphasising the importance of understanding the ways in which it can be harnessed as well as ways in which it can be harmful. To contextualise the interpretations of these findings, the following section examines how the synthesis integrates into and extends the existing literature base.

The findings of this synthesis corroborate and enrich existing understandings of how social support shapes the mental health of gender diverse youth. Prior research has established the importance of gender affirmation in supporting the mental health of gender diverse youth (Wittlin et al, 2023). One study found that affirmation across contexts was associated with developmentally normative mental health in gender diverse children (Olsen et al, 2016). Gender affirming processes such as parents using their child's chosen name have found to be associated with less anxiety and depression (Fontanari et al, 2020). Furthermore, being able to use their chosen name in multiple contexts (e.g., home, school, work, friends) appears to reduce mental health risks such as suicidal ideation, suicidal behaviour and depression (Russell et al, 2018). In particular, the findings align with and extend the conclusions of a recent qualitative synthesis, which also noted the importance of supportive action that goes beyond just acceptance of gender identity for youth aged

18 or younger (Tyni et al, 2024). The present findings build on this by highlighting the importance of stable, unambiguous proactive affirmation, that is sufficiently robust to counter anticipated stigma and create relational safety.

The detrimental impact of ambivalent parental support is reflected in emerging quantitative research in which adults from ambivalent and rejecting families experienced equally poor mental health outcomes, which were worse than individuals with affirming families (Allen et al, 2022). This supports the idea that ambivalence may be best understood as amplifying existing stigma and threat rather than acting as partial protection. Similar findings have been demonstrated in educational environments in which variable support, which included the lack of follow up from school health professionals after bullying, was harmful (Day & Brömdal, 2024). Contrasting to this, chosen family in the findings of this synthesis provided consistent unencumbered support, which is corroborated by the existing literature (Jackson et al, 2020). The present study built on these findings by highlighting the limitations of this support network regarding instrumental support, particularly when chosen family comprised other youth.

The substantial effort involved in accessing support, including cost-benefit analysis of disclosure and educating others, both compliments and extends Tyni and colleagues' (2024) conclusions regarding emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979). The constant possibility of rejection and having to hide or adjust true feelings is a kind of emotional labour, which compounds existing daily challenges and negatively impacts wellbeing (Tyni et al, 2024). Youth are constantly trying to create conditions in which support can be safely accessed. A prior review of cisgender siblings reported that gender diverse youth sometimes didn't acknowledge the burden placed on families

to adjust to gender diversity (Klepper et al, 2024), whereas the current synthesis suggests that youth are highly sensitive to these dynamics and the awareness of being a potential burden adds an additional layer of labour that further compounds minority stress. Taken together these recent findings support the growing literature base which is starting to recognise potential harms associated with social support. This helps to move beyond common conceptualisations that frame support as simply present or absent, or as a straightforward protective factor (e.g., Tankersley et al, 2021).

The findings align with the minority stress model, which proposes that mental health disparities are not inherent to minoritised status, rather arise from accumulative social stress created by stigma and discrimination (Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) outlines distal (external, observable), interactive proximal (expectation and vigilance for threat) and internalised proximal (internalised negative attitudes) stressors. The labour associated with social support in this synthesis can be understood as a behavioural manifestation of these stressors. Decisions about disclosure, the work of educating others, and the ongoing monitoring of interpersonal safety represent forms of labour that emerge directly from anticipating stigma in social interactions, which may be accentuated in the current socio-political climate. This labour not only reflects proximal stress processes but also perpetuates them, as negotiating uncertain support environments reinforces the need for caution and vigilance. In this way, the findings extend minority stress theory by identifying the relational work youth must undertake to navigate support networks within stigmatising contexts, revealing labour as a mechanism through which minority stress becomes enacted in everyday social life.

Clinical implications

The findings of this synthesis carry important implications for clinical psychologists and other professionals working with gender diverse youth across healthcare, educational and community settings. Given that support is often experienced as highly variable and context dependant, clinicians should be aware that many young people will be navigating inconsistent, conditional or ambivalent support across social contexts. These dynamics not only influence mental health but may also shape how youth approach and engage with services.

A central clinical implication concerns the significance of relational safety. Youth in this synthesis operated at a baseline of threat and anticipated stigma which influenced whether and how they sought support. Thus, therapeutic work must prioritise the creation of a safe space, in which youth don't have to assess their safety or manage others' reactions. This can be supported through straightforward practices such as using youth's chosen name and pronouns, actively listening without judgment and have a baseline of knowledge about how minority stress may be impacting them (e.g., awareness of the burdens they may be holding). Once relational safety is reliably established, youth are likely more able to discuss their identity, access support and engage in meaningful psychological work.

Given the substantial labour that gender diverse youth describe undertaking, such as educating others and managing the emotional demands of disclosure, clinical psychologists are well positioned to reduce this burden. Clinicians can do so both in the therapeutic relationship and in the wider systems that youth interact with. Clinical psychologists can offer balanced high-quality information both in therapeutic relationships and across wider systems such as families, schools and multi-

disciplinary teams, thereby redistributing some of the educational labour youth carry out.

There is also a need to support alternative networks that youth construct, including chosen family. Clinicians can help youth access peer and community spaces which foster connection. This can be considered for youth on waiting lists to be seen in gender services, but also in the planning and execution of therapy (e.g., group therapy) or peer support when accessing services. Clinicians can advocate for service environments that minimise unnecessary barriers, such as through inclusive administration systems or facilities. At the same time, clinicians can work with young people to develop strategies for navigating less supportive contexts in ways that prioritise safety without reinforcing concealment as the only viable option.

Strengths, limitations and future directions

To date, this synthesis represents the first review to focus specifically on how social support impacts the mental health of gender diverse youth, from their own perspective. The search strategy was intentionally broad, incorporating a diverse range of terms relating to gender diversity, social support and mental health. By not restricting searches by age, this approach minimised the risk of omitting relevant studies and allowed diverse forms of support and related mental health experiences to be captured. The transparent and systematic analytic process which followed Thomas and Harden's (2008) guidance, alongside the inclusion of a quality appraisal procedure involving a second independent reviewer, further strengthen the credibility and reproducibility of this review.

Several limitations must also be acknowledged. The purposeful decision to include only articles that explicitly discussed the relationship between social support and mental health within the microsystem, meant that articles describing social support without linking it directly to wellbeing, or examining support beyond the microsystem were excluded. This may have narrowed the conceptualisation of what support can entail. For example, emerging research highlights the importance of online environments as a source of support for gender diverse youth (e.g., Selkie et al, 2020), yet this fell outside the scope of the present review. The exclusion of grey literature, studies not published in English, and articles not accessible through the university library may also have further limited the breadth of this review.

This synthesis focussed on experiences related to gender identity rather than how broader intersecting identities such as ethnicity or neurodiversity may also shape support. This gap is particularly salient given that the overall sample of the included studies were predominantly white, highlighting a wider lack of research exploring the experiences of racially minoritised gender diverse youth. Future research would benefit from exploring how social support operates in the context of intersecting marginalisations, to capture more fully the complexities through which social support influences mental health. Several of the studies included in this review failed to sufficiently articulate researcher epistemology and positioning, despite the importance of these considerations within a socio-political climate in which gender diverse communities are subject to heightened scrutiny. Given that the researcher's assumptions and values inevitably shape the research process, transparency in positionality is essential for evaluating the credibility and reflexivity of qualitative work. Future research would benefit from articulating these clearly. Furthermore, several of the included studies in this review did not sufficiently articulate their ethical

considerations, which is particularly salient within the broader context of threat and anticipated stigma identified in this synthesis. Future studies should, therefore, take additional care to establish ethically robust processes which establish enough relational safety to participate fully in research.

Conclusion

This review clearly frames social support for gender diverse youth as a negotiated, effortful and context dependant process, whose protective value depends on consistency, safety and the reduction of anticipated stigma. Support is often a dynamic interplay of affirmation, relational labour and structural context, offering valuable insight into how support impacts mental health.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Example of line-by-line coding in NVivo

File   Home   Import   Create   Explore   Share   Modules   **PDF**

Self-education. Participants described how their parents pro-actively made efforts to become better informed about diverse gender identities and trans health topics. These participants be-lieved that these efforts demonstrated a sincere interest in trying to help them, and they appreciated the fact that the burden of edu-cating their parents did not fall entirely on them:

[My parents] didn't really understand the whole thing, but they really took it upon themselves to learn about it. Like, without me even asking, they bought books, watched movies and documentaries. They wanted to reach out to any resources that were available—like differ-ent organizations and different things online. (Participant 24, age 18, trans female, mixed race)

Emotional support. Participants also gave examples of their parents providing emotional support specific to their experiences of gender dysphoria and gender identity discrimination and inval-idation. One participant described how his mother comforted him when he was distressed about the structural barriers to obtaining top surgery:

I was upset the other day about top surgery and when I found out that probably I will not be having top surgery this summer. I really wanted to just have top surgery this summer, before I go away to school and everything like that. We just like, hugged for a really long time . . . She was just like, "Yeah, I wish I could do more to help." And that I was lucky to have a small chest and that it's going to happen, and that all we have to do is wait. My time will come. Stuff that I do not really want to hear, but I know she had a nice sentiment behind it. It was pretty positive. (Participant 6, age 17, nonbinary trans guy, Black)

Another participant described how his mother recognized the impact that gender dysphoria and experiences of nonaffirmation had on his mental health, and because of this, she allowed him to take time off from school when he was struggling emotionally:

My parents definitely picked up on stuff and my mom would let me take mental health days when it was really bad. You know, when I just didn't want anyone to even look at me, and I didn't wanna go outside. She was really supportive and she would push me to go to school—and she was pushing me for sure, because she was afraid of me getting back into those depressive habits. But then she would give me leniency a lot of the time too. She's always been pretty good at that. (Participant 21, age 18, trans male, White)

"We're gonna need you to use female pronouns while you're here." They were like, "Yeah, like we heard about the 'they/them thing,' but we basically didn't take that seriously." . . . So my mom was like, "Not gonna leave my kid here. This isn't going to help him get better." So we packed up all the stuff we'd put in my room, and we drove back. (Participant 21, age 18, trans male, White)

Another participant described his mother's willingness to act as a trans advocate during her interactions with strangers:

My mom is a really outspoken person . . . when someone does something or says something shitty she's immediately on it. Like, "You can't. Don't say that, like you're wrong, you're awful. Why are you saying that?" She has become a cis ally in the best kind of way. (Participant 19, age 20, trans male, Latinx)

Instrumental support. Participants reported that their parents offered instrumental support related to their gender identity, such as purchasing gender affirming clothing, makeup, and/or binders for them and giving them money for transportation to attend support groups or medical appointments. This instrumental support was critical, as most participants were financially dependent on their parents. One participant explained how grateful she was that her mother went to great efforts to provide her with instrumental support, despite the fact that she was dependent on government assistance and had limited financial resources:

We do not have an abundance of money. . . . We get like $700 every month. You have to pay for the light, the rent, cell phone bills, and the groceries or whatever . . . So my mom—thank god she's a smart woman, and she rations things out. She's very frugal with some things, so she will be able to give me money so I can buy makeup. I'm able to buy clothing. So, I can buy perfume. So, I can buy wigs and stuff like that. So, I'm able to feel better transitioning. Like, you know, just make my self-esteem be up there, instead of down here. (Participant 2, age 17, trans female, Latinx)

Assistance in obtaining gender affirming medical care. Although many parents expressed concerns about safety and side effects, some participants reported that their parents were open to learning more about the potential risks and benefits and demon-strated this by helping them navigate the complex appointment

CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- inconsistent parental support
- perceived parental dismissal of identity
- gratitude of parent affirmative efforts
- parent attempt to persuade child against gender identity
- parental control and surveillence
- frustration parent dismissing desire for gender affirming care
- resent parent restriction of gender affirming care
- parent restriction of gender affirming care fuelled by fear
- parent lack of empathy
- parent advocacy
- parent emotional support
- parent hearing and responding to childs gender related c
- parent age and culture influenced attitude
- parent emotional support but not allowing gender affirming care - frustration
- practical parent affirmation
- parental rejection led to financial and housing instability
- parent accepted sexual orientation but not gender
- loss of parental support following trans disclosure
- parental mistakes distressing but good intent is buffering
- parent advocacy in educational instiutions
- parental dismissal of identity shut down communication
- parent nonaffirmation
- importance of parental validation
- parent lack of practical support
- parent threat to kick child out house if they do hormones
- parent harrassment
- parental view gender identity is confusion, temporary, or due to trauma
- parents trying to prove child not trans
- parent failure to acknowledge distress
- parent ridicule instead of support
- parent lack of care in suicide discourse
- parent prioritising gender affirming support
- practical parental support critical as youth financial

In   Codes   Code to   Enter code name (CTRL+Q)

Appendix B

Example of the grouping of similar codes to capture shared meaning which then contributed to descriptive theme development which was completed in Microsoft Excel

	Name of code	Name of article	Cluster	Second Cluster	Third cluster	Fourth cluster	Descriptive theme
1							
2	a prevalent stigma belief was that trans identity is wrong and was explained by religion or biology	An expected part of being trans_the experienced and anticipated stigma of trans adolescents	Stigma, Anticipated Stigma & Minority Stress				Minority stress and stigma
3	absurdity of having to emotionally support parents during an emotionally stressful time for youth	Support networks of transmasculine and nonbinary young adults during chosen name transition	Emotional and Psychological Impacts	Family communication			Family and parent support
4	acceptance and affirmation of peers through correct pronouns and name use improved wellbeing in schools	School Factors Strongly Impact Transgender and Non-Binary youths wellbeing	Chosen Family and Peer Support	Emotional and Psychological Impacts			Peers and chosen family
5	acceptance is not the same as being actively supporting	The Role of Family Friend and Significant Other Support in Well-Being Among Transgender and Non-Binary Youth	Distinction between acceptance and active support				Family and parent support
6	acceptance means being seen and validated	The Role of Family Friend and Significant Other Support in Well-Being Among Transgender and Non-Binary	Emotional and Psychological Impacts				Family and parent support
7	acceptance means people respect their dignity as humans, including their identified gender	The Role of Family Friend and Significant Other Support in Well-Being Among Transgender and Non-Binary Youth	Distinction between acceptance and active support				Family and parent support
	acceptance needs follow up action due to	The Role of Family Friend and	Distinction				

Appendix C

Descriptive themes and subthemes which formed the basis for the generation of analytical themes

Descriptive theme	Subtheme
Family and parent support - a crucial, complex and precarious foundation for wellbeing	1) Acceptance means taking action - active recognition, validation and concrete action
	2) Emotional burden of absorbing parents' reactions and guiding them through process - educating and guilt
	3) Barriers to parental support - knowledge, beliefs and media
	4) Ambivalent, inconsistent and conditional support
	5) Rejection and non-affirmation
	6) Protective role of support in other spheres of life
	7) Possibility of growth over time
Peers and chosen family - buffering and vital for mental health	1) Active affirmation - taking action and providing safe space
	2) Shared experience as emotional, informational and identity support
	3) Alternative to family of origin when unsupportive
	4) Peers and community protection against distress
	5) Barriers, tensions and exclusions by peers and LGBT community

	6) Support often reciprocal
Educational institutions	1) Climates shared by stigma and cisnormativity
	2) Non-affirmation common sources of distress e.g., misgendering
	3) Bullying and discrimination
	4) Educating others and navigating strategically
	5) Impact on wellbeing and belonging
	6) Safety and affirmation through individuals
Minority stress and stigma	1) Toll of ubiquity of stigma
	2) Anticipated stigma and hypervigilance
	3) Identity invalidation
	4) Labour of correcting and education
	5) Structural stigma
	6) Impact of intersectionality
	7) Stigma shaping relationships and expectations
Youth coping strategies	1) Concealment and visibility management
	2) Strategic navigation of relationships and environments
	3) Self-advocacy and seeking support
	4) Self-reliance
	5) Authenticity vs safety

Appendix D

Example of the Exploration of the descriptive themes and associated quotes to support analytical theme development, which was completed in Excel

Descriptive Theme	Core insights, so what? Main mechanism at work?	Impact on mental health examples	Code that represents this idea	Study	Code that represents this idea	Study	Code that is a good quote	Study	Code that is a good quote	Study	Code that is a good quote	Stud
Family and parent support - a crucial, complex and precarious foundation for wellbeing	1) Acceptance means taking action - active recognition, validation and concrete action	protective, enabling authenticity, reducing lonliness	nothing other than full and committed support was trusted by youth	An expected part of being trans_the experienced and anticipated stigma of trans adolescents	support is acceptance with actions Participants define support here	The Role of Family Friend and Significant Other Support in Well-Being Among Transgender and Non-Binary Youth	parent efforts to educate themselves valued This is way of showing support actively	Power_Trans Young People's Perceptions of Parental Reactions to their Gender Identity and Perceived Barriers and Facilitators to Parental Support	ambivalent parent reaction to disclosure - words but no action This is not a quote but it does explain about words without action	Knowledge is Power_Trans Young People's Perceptions of their Gender Identity and Perceived Barriers and Facilitators to Parental Support	verbal parental affirmation without action creates desperation good quote	He ca times
	2) Emotional burden of absorbing parents reactions and guiding them through process - educating and guilt	emotional strain, anxiety	burden of educating parents on name change **This is also a brilliant quote**	Support networks of transmasculine and nonbinary young adults during chosen name transition	tradeoff between authenticity and burden of educating others **Good quote, not specific to parents**	Invalidation Experiences Among Non-Binary Adolescents	additional burden of educating parents too much when already struggling to cope	Power_Trans Young People's Perceptions of Parental Reactions to their Gender Identity and Perceived Barriers and Facilitators to Parental Support	parent efforts to educate themselves valued This shows how parents can help with this	Trans Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences of Their Parents' Supportive and Rejecting Behaviors	parental willingness to learn parents countering this	He ca times
	3) Barriers to parental support - knowledge, beliefs and media	invisibility and shame	parent understanding a principal barrier to lack of support **also has a quote about young person educating parent**	Knowledge is Power_Trans Young People's Perceptions of Parental Reactions to their Gender Identity and Perceived Barriers and Facilitators to Parental Support	discern good quality information to educate themselves - barrier to parental support **quote about child saying where to find information**	Knowledge is Power_Trans Young People's Perceptions of Parental Reactions to their Gender Identity and Perceived Barriers and Facilitators to Parental Support	family rejection due to religion or ignorance quote says how hurtful rejection is and then authors talk about attribution to religion	Power_Trans Young People's Perceptions of Parental Reactions to their Gender Identity and Perceived Barriers and Facilitators to Parental Support	perserverence to educate parents following harmful media educating parents after harmful stuff absorbed from media	He can be supportive but at times I feel he is ashamed of me	
	4) Ambivalent, inconsistant and conditional support	anxiety and reduced trust	parental financial support provided conditionally to impede transition Financial control and family rejection led to lonliness, contemplating suicide, isolation and withdrawal **has a good quote** family support helped	Perspectives of transgender youth on parental support Qualitative findings from the resilience and transgender youth study I Had Attained the Identity I Had Long Desired A Grounded Theory Study of Experiences of Transgender Men in Digging beneath the	inconsistent parental support impacts quality of life He can be supportive but at times I feel he is ashamed of me **good quote too**		ambivalent parent reaction to disclosure - words but no action Negative neutrality described - ambivalent	Digging beneath the surface Results from stage one of a qualitative analysis of factors influencing the well-being of trans	inconsistent parental support evokes shame	He can be supportive but at times I feel he is ashamed of me		
	5) Rejection and non affirmation	depression, anxiety, isolation, self harm, suicidal ideation			parent rejection exacerbates mental health issues **has good quote**	Trans Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences of Their Parents' Supportive and Rejecting Behaviors	parental rejection made them feel like a burden parent protective of	Trans Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences of Their Parents' Supportive and Rejecting Behaviors	trauma from parent rejection Importance of parents opinon	Trans Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences of Their Parents' Supportive and Rejecting Behaviors	misgendering leads to depression quote	Inval Non-

Appendix E

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme qualitative research checklist (CASP, 2024)

CASP Checklist:
For Qualitative Research

Reviewer Name:	
Paper Title:	
Author:	
Web Link:	
Appraisal Date:	

During critical appraisal, never make assumptions about what the researchers have done. If it is not possible to tell, use the "Can't tell" response box. If you can't tell, at best it means the researchers have not been explicit or transparent, but at worst it could mean the researchers have not undertaken a particular task or process. Once you've finished the critical appraisal, if there are a large number of "Can't tell" responses, consider whether the findings of the study are trustworthy and interpret the results with caution.

Section A Are the results valid?	
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *what was the goal of the research?* • *why was it thought important?* • *its relevance*	
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants* • *Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal?*	
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g., have they discussed how they decided which method to use)*	
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If the researcher has explained how the participants were selected* • *If they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study* • *If there are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)*	
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell

CONSIDER:

- *If the setting for the data collection was justified*
- *If it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview etc.)*
- *If the researcher has justified the methods chosen*
- *If the researcher has made the methods explicit (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews are conducted, or did they use a topic guide)*
- *If methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why*
- *If the form of data is clear (e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes etc.)*
- *If the researcher has discussed saturation of data*

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell

CONSIDER:

- *If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location*
- *How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design*

Section B: What are the results?

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell

CONSIDER:

- *If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained*
- *If the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)*
- *If approval has been sought from the ethics committee*

8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell

CONSIDER: • *If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process* • *If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data* • *Whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process* • *If sufficient data are presented to support the findings* • *To what extent contradictory data are taken into account* • *Whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation*	
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If the findings are explicit* • *If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments* • *If the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)* • *If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question*	

Section C: Will the results help locally?

10. How valuable is the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding (e.g., do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature* • *If they identify new areas where research is necessary* • *If the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used*	

APPRAISAL SUMMARY: *List key points from your critical appraisal that need to be considered when assessing the validity of the results and their usefulness in decision-making.*

Positive/Methodologically sound	Negative/Relatively poor methodology	Unknowns

Referencing recommendation:

CASP recommends using the Harvard style referencing, which is an author/date method. Sources are cited within the body of your assignment by giving the name of the author(s) followed by the date of publication. All other details about the publication are given in the list of references or bibliography at the end.

Example:

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2024). CASP (insert name of checklist i.e. systematic reviews with meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) Checklist.) [online] Available at: insert URL. Accessed: insert date accessed.

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Appendix F

Table F1

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses' (PRISMA; Page et al, 2021) Checklist

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
TITLE			
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review.	1
ABSTRACT			
Abstract	2	See the PRISMA 2020 for Abstracts checklist.	2
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	4-6
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objective(s) or question(s) the review addresses.	6
METHODS			
Eligibility criteria	5	Specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review and how studies were grouped for the syntheses.	8
Information sources	6	Specify all databases, registers, websites, organisations, reference lists and other sources searched or consulted to identify studies. Specify the date when each source was last searched or consulted.	10
Search strategy	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, registers and websites, including any filters and limits used.	10
Selection process	8	Specify the methods used to decide whether a study met the inclusion criteria of the review, including how many reviewers screened each record and each report retrieved, whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	11
Data collection process	9	Specify the methods used to collect data from reports, including how many reviewers collected data from each report, whether they worked independently, any processes for obtaining or confirming data from study investigators, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	11
Data items	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought. Specify whether all results that were compatible with each outcome domain in each study were sought (e.g. for all measures, time points, analyses), and if not, the methods used to decide which results to collect.	11
	10b	List and define all other variables for which data were sought (e.g. participant and intervention characteristics, funding sources). Describe any assumptions made about any missing or unclear information.	16
Study risk of bias assessment	11	Specify the methods used to assess risk of bias in the included studies, including details of the tool(s) used, how many reviewers assessed each study and whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	12, 26, 75
Effect measures	12	Specify for each outcome the effect measure(s) (e.g. risk ratio, mean difference) used in the synthesis or presentation of results.	N/A
Synthesis methods	13a	Describe the processes used to decide which studies were eligible for each synthesis (e.g. tabulating the study intervention characteristics and comparing against the planned groups for each synthesis (item #5)).	11

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
	13b	Describe any methods required to prepare the data for presentation or synthesis, such as handling of missing summary statistics, or data conversions.	N/A
	13c	Describe any methods used to tabulate or visually display results of individual studies and syntheses.	N/A
	13d	Describe any methods used to synthesize results and provide a rationale for the choice(s). If meta-analysis was performed, describe the model(s), method(s) to identify the presence and extent of statistical heterogeneity, and software package(s) used.	7, 12
	13e	Describe any methods used to explore possible causes of heterogeneity among study results (e.g. subgroup analysis, meta-regression).	N/A
	13f	Describe any sensitivity analyses conducted to assess robustness of the synthesized results.	12, 26, 75
Reporting bias assessment	14	Describe any methods used to assess risk of bias due to missing results in a synthesis (arising from reporting biases).	N/A
Certainty assessment	15	Describe any methods used to assess certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for an outcome.	12, 26, 75
RESULTS			
Study selection	16a	Describe the results of the search and selection process, from the number of records identified in the search to the number of studies included in the review, ideally using a flow diagram.	15
	16b	Cite studies that might appear to meet the inclusion criteria, but which were excluded, and explain why they were excluded.	11
Study characteristics	17	Cite each included study and present its characteristics.	16-25
Risk of bias in studies	18	Present assessments of risk of bias for each included study.	75-81
Results of individual studies	19	For all outcomes, present, for each study: (a) summary statistics for each group (where appropriate) and (b) an effect estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval), ideally using structured tables or plots.	N/A
Results of syntheses	20a	For each synthesis, briefly summarise the characteristics and risk of bias among contributing studies.	16-25
	20b	Present results of all statistical syntheses conducted. If meta-analysis was done, present for each the summary estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval) and measures of statistical heterogeneity. If comparing groups, describe the direction of the effect.	N/A
	20c	Present results of all investigations of possible causes of heterogeneity among study results.	N/A
	20d	Present results of all sensitivity analyses conducted to assess the robustness of the synthesized results.	N/A
Reporting biases	21	Present assessments of risk of bias due to missing results (arising from reporting biases) for each synthesis assessed.	N/A
Certainty of evidence	22	Present assessments of certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for each outcome assessed.	N/A
DISCUSSION			
Discussion	23a	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.	40-42

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
	23b	Discuss any limitations of the evidence included in the review.	46-48
	23c	Discuss any limitations of the review processes used.	46-48
	23d	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research.	45-46
OTHER INFORMATION			
Registration and protocol	24a	Provide registration information for the review, including register name and registration number, or state that the review was not registered.	7
	24b	Indicate where the review protocol can be accessed, or state that a protocol was not prepared.	7
	24c	Describe and explain any amendments to information provided at registration or in the protocol.	N/A
Support	25	Describe sources of financial or non-financial support for the review, and the role of the funders or sponsors in the review.	N/A
Competing interests	26	Declare any competing interests of review authors.	ii
Availability of data, code and other materials	27	Report which of the following are publicly available and where they can be found: template data collection forms; data extracted from included studies; data used for all analyses; analytic code; any other materials used in the review.	N/A

Table F2

The Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research (ENTREQ; Tong et al, 2012) Checklist

Number	Item	Guide questions/description	Location (Page number)
1	Aim	State the research question the synthesis addresses	6
2	Synthesis methodology	Identify the synthesis methodology or theoretical framework which underpins the synthesis, and describe the rationale for choice of methodology	7
3	Approach to searching	Indicate whether the search was pre-planned (comprehensive search strategies to seek all available studies) or iterative (to seek all available concepts until theoretical saturation achieved)	7
4	Inclusion criteria	Specify the inclusion/exclusion criteria (e.g. in terms of population, language, year limits, type of publication, study type)	8
5	Data sources	Describe the information sources used (e.g. electronic databases (MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, psycINFO), grey literature databases, (digital thesis, policy reports), relevant organisational websites, experts, information specialists, generic web searches (Google Scholar), hand searching (references lists) and when the searches conducted; provide the rationale for using the data sources	10
6	Electronic search strategy	Describe the literature search (e.g. provide electronic search strategies with population terms, clinical or health topic terms, experiential or social phenomena related terms, filters for qualitative research, and search limits)	9-11
7	Study screening methods	Describe the process of study screening and sifting (e.g. title, abstract and full text review, number of independent reviewers who screened the studies)	11
8	Study characteristics	Present the characteristics of the included studies (e.g. year of publication, country, population, number of participants, data collection, methodology, analysis, research questions)	16-25
9	Study selection	Identify the number of studies screened	15

	results	and provide reasons for study exclusion (e.g. for comprehensive searching, provide numbers of studies screened and reasons for exclusion indicated in a figure/flowchart; for iterative searching describe reasons for study exclusion and inclusion based on modifications to the research question and/or contribution to theory development)	
10	Rationale for appraisal	Describe the rationale and approach used to appraise the included studies or selected findings (e.g. assessment of conduct, validity and robustness), assessment of reporting (transparency), assessment of content and utility of the findings	12
11	Appraisal items	State the tools, frameworks and criteria used to appraise the studies or selected findings (e.g. Existing tools: CASP, QARI, COREQ; reviewer developed tools; describe the domains assessed: research team, study design, data analysis and interpretations, reporting)	12
12	Appraisal process	Indicate whether the appraisal was conducted independently by more than one reviewer and if consensus was required	11
13	Appraisal results	Present results of the quality assessment and indicate which articles, if any, were weighted/excluded based on the assessment and give the rationale	75-81
14	Data extraction	Indicate which sections of the primary studies were analysed and how were the data extracted from the primary studies? (e.g. all text under the headings "results/conclusions" were extracted electronically and entered in a computer software)	11
15	Software	State the computer software used, if any	11
16	Number of reviewers	Identify who was involved in coding and analysis	12
17	Coding	Describe the process for coding of data (e.g. line by line coding to search for concepts)	12
18	Study comparison	Describe how comparisons were made within and across studies (e.g. subsequent studies were coded into pre-existing concepts, and new concepts were created when deemed necessary	12
19	Derivation of themes	Explain whether the process of deriving the themes or constructs was inductive or	12

		deductive	
20	Quotations	Provide quotations from the primary studies to illustrate themes/constructs, and identify whether the quotations were participation quotations of the author's interpretation	27-39
21	Synthesis output	Present rich, compelling and useful results that go beyond a summary of the primary studies (e.g. new interpretation, models of evidence, conceptual models, analytical framework, development of a new theory or construct)	26-4

* Reference: Tong A, Flemming K, McInnes E, Oliver SA, Craig J. Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research: ENTREQ. BMC Medical Research Methodology 2012, 12:181 [35]

Appendix G

Summary of the Quality Assessment of Studies using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Qualitative Research Checklist (CASP)

Author (year)	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Research design appropriate for aims?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate to aims?	5. Data collected in a way that addressed the research?	6. Relationship between researcher and participants considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear statement of findings?	10. Value – will results help locally?	Appraisal summary	Level of concern
Andrzejewski et al. (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear and well justified aim. The findings are clearly presented with supporting quotes. The study provides limited reflexivity and exploration of researcher influences.	Moderate
Barras, A., & Jones, B. A. (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. The study relied on survey responses which likely	Moderate

Author (year)	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Research design appropriate for aims?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate to aims?	5. Data collected in a way that addressed the research?	6. Relationship between researcher and participants considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear statement of findings?	10. Value – will results help locally?	Appraisal summary	Level of concern
											impedes depth of exploration. Consent not explored.	
Bhattacharyya & Rakesh (2025)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear and justified aims and methodology. Limited regarding researchers positioning and epistemology.	Moderate
Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear aims and design and strong use of theory. Limited reflexivity and exploration of researcher positioning. Predominantly white sample.	Moderate

Author (year)	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Research design appropriate for aims?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate to aims?	5. Data collected in a way that addressed the research?	6. Relationship between researcher and participants considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear statement of findings?	10. Value – will results help locally?	Appraisal summary	Level of concern
Hill, Perry, Lin & Ohan (2025)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong methodological quality and transparency.	Low
Johnson et al (2020a)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. Limited exploration of researcher positioning and influence.	Moderate
Johnson et al (2020b)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong methodological quality and transparency. No statement of epistemology.	Low
Jones et al (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong methodological quality and transparency.	Low

Author (year)	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Research design appropriate for aims?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate to aims?	5. Data collected in a way that addressed the research?	6. Relationship between researcher and participants considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear statement of findings?	10. Value – will results help locally?	Appraisal summary	Level of concern
Karakısla et al (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. Limited exploration of researcher positioning and influence.	Moderate
Kelley et al (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. Lack of information about interview structure and exploration of research positioning and influence.	Moderate
Morgan et al (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. Lack of	Moderate

Author (year)	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Research design appropriate for aims?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate to aims?	5. Data collected in a way that addressed the research?	6. Relationship between researcher and participants considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear statement of findings?	10. Value – will results help locally?	Appraisal summary	Level of concern
											exploration of research positioning and influence.	
Morrow & McGuire (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. Epistemology not discussed.	Low
Muzzey et al (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. Epistemology not discussed.	Low
Robinson et al (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Clear, well justified aims and findings are presented clearly. Lack of exploration of research positioning and	Moderate

Author (year)	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Research design appropriate for aims?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate to aims?	5. Data collected in a way that addressed the research?	6. Relationship between researcher and participants considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear statement of findings?	10. Value – will results help locally?	Appraisal summary	Level of concern
											influence. Little discussion of contradictory data.	
Sansfaçon et al (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clear aims and strong justification. Thoughtful about diversity sampling and including trans community in the research process. Not enough exploration on ethics regarding consent, confidentiality and how distress was managed.	Moderate
Weinhardt et al (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Clear aims and strong justification.	Moderate

Author (year)	1. Clear aims?	2. Qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Research design appropriate for aims?	4. Recruitment strategy appropriate to aims?	5. Data collected in a way that addressed the research?	6. Relationship between researcher and participants considered?	7. Ethical issues considered?	8. Rigorous data analysis?	9. Clear statement of findings?	10. Value – will results help locally?	Appraisal summary	Level of concern
											Biassed recruitment strategy and limited exploration of the role of the researcher.	
Wilson, Griffin & Wren (2005)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Clear aims and justification. Lacked reflexivity and transparency in recruitment strategy, limited detail on analysis and no statement of ethics committee approval.	Moderate

Appendix H

Descriptive Themes and Which Articles Contributed to Them

Descriptive theme	Reference																
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Family and parent support - a crucial, complex and precarious foundation for wellbeing	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Peers and chosen family – buffering and vital for mental health			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Educational institutions – sites of safety and harm				X	X	X	X	X		X					X		
Minority stress and stigma*			X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X			X	X	X
Coping strategies	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note. 1. Andrzejewski et al. (2021), 2. Barras, A., & Jones, B. A. (2024), 3. Bhattacharyya & Rakesh (2025), 4. Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black (2019), 5. Hill, Perry, Lin & Ohan (2025). 6. Johnson et al (2020a), 7. Johnson et al (2020b), 8. Jones et al (2024), 9. Karakısla et al (2024), 10. Kelley et al (2022), 11. Morgan et al (2023), 12. Morrow & McGuire (2024), 13. Muzzey et al (2022), 14. Robinson et al (2024), 15. Sansfaçon et al (2020), 16. Weinhardt et al (2019), 17. Wilson, Griffin & Wren (2005)

*The descriptive theme 'minority stress and stigma' captured experiences of minority stress and stigma that were not specific to family, peers, or institutions, but were still important to the overall picture of social support. When the context of minority stress and stigma was specified, the data were assigned into the corresponding theme (e.g., educational institutions).

Section Two: Research Report

An Exploration of Gender Diverse Youths' Experiences of Educational Institutions in

Relation to their Identity

Abstract

Objectives

Research suggests that formal educational settings can pose risks to the mental health of gender diverse youth, yet there remains limited contextualised understanding of these experiences. This study aimed to explore how these young people experience and navigate educational institutions.

Methods

Using a Photovoice-informed qualitative design, participants took photographs to represent their identity. These images enriched discussions during semi-structured interviews about their experiences of educational institutions in relation to their identity. Interview data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, with participants' images supporting interpretation.

Results

The analysis generated three themes: '*Institutional support is contingent: "just no consistency"*', '*Carrying the burden: gender diversity within a cisnormative framework*' and '*Strength through struggle*'.

Conclusions

Support within educational institutions was experienced as fragile and heavily dependent on individual staff and circumstantial institutional features. Gender diverse youth were often left responsible for ensuring their own safety and recognition, a labour-intensive process associated with cumulative stress. Although participants demonstrated considerable resilience, this resilience was forged, at least in part, through adversity and carried significant emotional cost.

Practitioner points

- Promote inclusion by identifying and addressing cisnormative structures within educational institutions, healthcare settings and beyond (e.g., facilitate inclusive administrative processes, inclusive labelling of facilities, language) that currently place disproportionate self-advocacy demands on gender diverse youth.

- Facilitate training and skill development of professionals and youth to promote trans-inclusive environments, drawing on frameworks such as minority stress to enhance understanding and confidence in challenging discrimination.

- In therapeutic work formulate distress in a way that acknowledges and validates structural and interpersonal burdens, and support gender identity exploration without pathologising.

- Strengthen trans-inclusive wellbeing pathways within educational institutions and services through collaboration and consultation, ensuring visible and accessible support for gender diverse youth.

- Build resilience through nourishment rather than adversity, by developing self-compassion, empowerment and supportive communities.

Introduction

Gender diverse youth are young people whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth, including those who identify as transgender, non-binary or gender-fluid. Research consistently shows that these young people experience disproportionately high rates of poor mental health compared to their cisgender[2] counterparts, including elevated anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (Holt, Skagerberg & Dunsford, 2016). These disparities have been interpreted using the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), which posits that stigma, prejudice and discrimination produce cumulative stress, leading to poor physical and mental health outcomes for marginalised groups (e.g., Johns et al, 2021). Minority stress operates externally, through discrimination, and internally, through processes such as vigilance and expectations of rejection. This framework highlights how gender diverse youth's wellbeing is shaped by both personal experiences and the broader societal structures and cultural norms within which they live.

These issues are particularly pertinent within the current sociopolitical landscape in the United Kingdom (UK), where gender diversity has become the focus of polarising public debate, as well as legal and policy changes. The Cass Independent Review (Cass, 2024), which followed a major judicial review, contributed to the restructuring of care pathways and subsequent uncertainty regarding gender specific healthcare. Additionally, a Supreme Court ruling interpreting the Equality Act (2010) on 16 April 2025, determined that "man" and "woman" should be defined by biological sex, raising concerns about how single sex spaces may be navigated by gender diverse people and how organisations may

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[2] Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity corresponds to the sex assigned to them at birth.

respond. These shifts reflect wider tensions surrounding gender diversity and have implications for young people's sense of safety and belonging in everyday settings.

Educational institutions, which form a major part of gender diverse youths' daily lives, have become central to recent public and political debate. The Department of Education's (2023) draft non-statutory guidance for gender questioning students recommends that schools notify parents when students express gender variance, and advise extreme caution in response to name, pronoun or uniform changes. This has generated discussion about the guidance's clarity and possible legal ramifications (Hilton, 2024), and may heighten anxiety for youth, particularly for those whose family aren't aware of their gender diversity. Given that such guidance shapes the practices and climates of educational institutions, it is notable that relatively little qualitative research has explored how educational institutions are experienced from the perspective of gender diverse youth themselves, representing an important gap in the literature.

Emerging research suggests that gender diverse youth frequently experience bullying, victimisation and safety concerns within secondary school environments, which have been associated with adverse mental health outcomes such as depressive symptoms, heightened stress and suicidal ideation (Mackie et al, 2021). Such findings suggest that educational settings can be discriminatory and unsafe for gender diverse youth. McBride (2021) interprets these harms through the lens of institutional cisnormativity, which relates to a social hierarchy organised around the assumption of a fixed female and male binary. McBride (2021) argues that gender diverse youth are exposed to microaggressions and macroaggressions that delegitimise their identities, constrain the disclosure of their gender identity and limit opportunities for peer connection and belonging, and contribute to internalised

shame. Yet the current literature is dominated by quantitative research conducted in the United States (US), underscoring the need for UK-based qualitative research to develop richer, more contextualised understanding of how gender diverse youth experience educational institutions (McBride, 2021).

Despite representing a minority within educational institutions, gender diverse youth experience some of the highest rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts amongst school aged people, emphasising the urgency of understanding how educational environments contribute to, or mitigate, these risks (Austin et al, 2020). Clinical psychologists whose work involves formulating, preventing and alleviating psychological distress across individual, relational and structural systems, are well placed to contribute to this understanding and to inform interventions that promote inclusion and wellbeing within educational settings. Thus, the aim for the current study is to identify and explore themes relating to gender diverse youths' experiences of educational institutions in relation to their identity.

Method

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee (Appendix A).

Design

This qualitative study was informed by the Photovoice method, in which participants were invited to take photographs to represent and communicate their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). These photographs served as prompts for further exploration during semi-structured interviews. Three sources of data were generated for each participant: one-two photographs, a written description of the photograph(s) (i.e., freewrite), and a transcript from the interview. Reflexive Thematic

Analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the interview transcripts, and the photographs and freewrites were used to support the interpretation of participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

RTA was selected due to its epistemological flexibility and suitability for identifying themes related to personal experiences. RTA positions the researcher and their experiences as a resource rather than a bias to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) did not align with the researcher's approach or study aims. Grounded Theory has a relatively positivist orientation, which tends to minimise the role of researcher subjectivity (Dey, 1999; Willig, 2013), while IPA has a reliance on language to adequately describe experiences (Willig, 2013).

Photovoice method

Photovoice is a participatory visual research method enabling participants to communicate experiences and needs through photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997). The photographs can then be used to promote critical dialogue in semi-structured interviews. In its purest form, Photovoice is situated within the broader framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, which emphasises collaboration between researchers and participants with a focus on social transformation (Wang 1999; Wang 2006).

Photovoice has been widely utilised to amplify the voices of individuals and communities that have been historically marginalised or silenced, which aligns closely with the aim of the present study (Foster-Fishman, Deacon & McCann, 2005; Sethi, 2014). The process of taking and discussing photographs encourages self-

reflection and supports the articulation of complex nuanced meanings embedded in lived experience, which can be explored in greater depth through semi-structured interviews (Willig, 2013). Such qualities make Photovoice particularly suitable for exploring personal and sensitive topics, such as gender identity, in a way that centres participants' perspectives. By engaging visual modes of expression, Photovoice can help make abstract concepts such as identity more concrete and accessible (Christensen, Capous-Desyllas & Arczynski, 2020).

The Photovoice method offers a flexible approach that can be tailored to meet the specific aims of varied research (Latz, 2017). It has been used to explore a broad range of topics including health and education (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

The present study draws on the Photovoice method to enable gender diverse youth to visually and verbally express their sense of identity, which was then further elaborated upon during semi-structured interviews to examine their experiences within educational institutions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide consistency and flexibility, incorporating core questions while allowing the participants to steer the conversation, in line with the PAR collaborative approach.

Sample size

The concept of information power (Malterud et al, 2016) guided the sample size. Information power proposes that the adequacy of a qualitative sample is determined by the relevance, richness and specificity of the information provided by participants, rather than the number of participants alone. The five domains that influence information power were carefully considered: the study aim, sample specificity, application of established theory, quality of dialogue and analysis strategy.

This study has a specific aim of exploring the experiences of gender diverse youth aged 16-25 who are currently in education. As this population represents a minority, with approximately 1% of 16-24-year-olds in England and Wales identifying as trans (Office for National Statistics, 2023), a smaller sample size was considered appropriate. Established theory (e.g., minority stress, Meyer 2003) informed the design, further strengthening its information power. The researcher's clinical experience within a Gender Identity Service supported rich and coherent dialogue with participants, further enhancing data quality. RTA was utilised to identify patterns across participants' accounts.

Taken together, a purposive sample size of 10-12 participants was deemed sufficient to provide adequate information power to address the study aims and elucidate key themes.

Participants

Twelve participants (aged 16-19, M = 17.42) who met the inclusion criteria took part (See Table 1). Participants' demographic information is presented in Table 2. Participants used a range of terms to describe their gender identity including trans man (n=5), trans male (n=1), trans male/masc (n=1), trans masc (n=1), trans masc gender-fluid (n=1), non-binary (n=1), trans ftm (n=1) and ambiguous (n=1). There were no participant drop-outs.

Table 1

Study Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Self identifies as gender diverse	Identifies as cisgender
Aged 16-25 years	
Currently in education	
Has access to a camera phone	
Able to communicate in English	

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Pronouns
1	17	White	Trans Masc Gender Fluid	He/him
2	16	White British	Non-binary	They/them
3	18	White British	Trans Masc	He/they
4	17	White British	Trans male	He/him
5	17	Whie	Trans man	He/him
6	17	South African	Trans male/masc	He/him
7	19	White British	Trans man	He/him
8	18	White British	Transgender man	He/him
9	17	White	Ambiguous (usually default to nonbinary or agender as these are terms people have heard of, but they don't quite fit)	They/it
10	18	White	Trans man	He/him
11	17	White British	Trans ftm	He/him
12	18	White British	Transgender man	He/him

Note. Demographics are participants' self-descriptions

Recruitment

Acknowledging the minority status of gender diverse youth and the rapidly evolving socio-political context in the UK, it was anticipated that recruitment may be challenging. Consequently, the study employed a strategically broad recruitment approach, which included ongoing monitoring and iterative adjustments throughout. The main adjustment made was to extend the age range from 16-18 to 16-25. This was carefully considered and was felt well justified within the context of identity development which takes place from adolescence into the early twenties (i.e., ~ages 16-25; Arnett, 2000).

The primary recruitment strategy was via educational institutions in the UK, beginning in Sheffield and expanding geographically until sufficient participants were recruited. Recruitment targeted the full range of educational institutions, including schools, further education colleges, and sixth-form colleges, all of which are encompassed in the draft non-statutory guidance for gender-questioning children (Department for Education, 2023), and was extended to include universities when the age range was extended. Educational institutions were identified by locality using the following government website (Department for Education, n.d.). This resulted in 827 educational institutions being contacted across Yorkshire and Humber, the East Midlands and some areas in the Northwest. Institutions were initially contacted via email, with follow-up telephone communication as required. The Sheffield school-based project Healthy Minds supported this recruitment stream by disseminating the study adverts (Appendix B) within the schools they worked into.

Additional recruitment avenues included third-sector and non-NHS organisations supporting gender diverse youth, and involved circulating study

information via email, social media, and meetings. Organisations were primarily identified through the Gender Identity Research and Education Society website (Gender Identity Research & Education Society, n.d.) and supplemented through professional contacts. The researcher also engaged directly with a youth group in Barnsley to present the study information in person. Supplementary strategies involved posting study information on social media (i.e., Facebook) and in trans-focused online Facebook communities, as well as encouraging participants to share study details with peers, thereby utilising a snowball recruitment approach.

Recruitment took place between September 2024 and March 2025.

Procedure

Participants who responded to the study adverts were sent the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) and invited to a virtual meeting with the researcher. This meeting provided an opportunity to discuss the study in detail, including the Photovoice method and associated ethical considerations. Ethical considerations included taking photographs ethically (i.e., not including images of people) as well as how the data would be used. Care was taken to establish relational safety.

Individuals who chose to take part signed a consent form (Appendix D). Consent from participants' parents was not required in the current study to safeguard youth whose parents may not be aware of their gender identity. After signing the consent form, participants were asked to take one or two photographs that represented their identity. The timeframe for taking the photographs was agreed individually according to individuals' preferences (typically 1-2 weeks). Participants emailed their photograph(s) and accompanying freewrites to the researcher and took part in a semi-structured interview. The interviews took place with the researcher

either in person at their educational institution (*n*=5) or online on Google Meet (*n*=7),

according to participant preference. These locations were selected to promote a

comfortable and secure environment in which participants could speak safely. For

online interviews, the researcher confirmed that participants were situated in a

private space where they could speak openly without interruption. After each

interview, the researcher checked in with participants regarding how they were

feeling and provided signposting information to relevant youth and LGBT support

organisations. Participants received a £10 voucher as an appreciation for their time.

Materials

Interview schedule

The semi-structured interview guide was informed by the SHOWeD technique

which is a structured questioning framework widely used in Photovoice projects to

facilitate critical reflection and dialogue about participants' photographs (Wang &

Burris, 1997, Table 3). In collaboration with the researcher's supervisors, the

SHOWeD questions were slightly modified and extended with further questions and

prompts, which aligned with the study aims (see Appendix E). The interviews were

audio recorded using a university approved device. Interviews ranged between 24-

68 minutes (M=51 minutes).

A distress protocol, developed in consultation with the researcher's

supervisor, was in place to ensure participant safety, with procedures to follow if

participants became distressed during the interview (Appendix F).

Table 3

SHOWeD Questions

What do you **S**ee here?
What is really **H**appening here?
How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
Why does this situation **E**xist?
What can we **D**o about it

Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) and professional consultation

The study design was shaped through consultation with gender diverse individuals and professionals working in this field. During the initial conceptualisation of the research, several local and national charities were approached for feedback. Gendered Intelligence recommended paying participants for their time, which was implemented. The Head of Data, Audit and Research at the Gender Identity Development Service endorsed the project as valuable and emphasised the importance of exploring experiences beyond the NHS (i.e., educational institutions). Further consultation was acquired from a CAMHS clinical psychologist, a PhD student involved in the CASS report, and three trainee clinical psychologists conducting research with gender diverse people.

Members of the gender diverse community provided valuable input. For example, a non-binary individual advised against conducting interviews in participants' homes, as families may not be aware of youths' gender identity. The Photovoice method was endorsed as empowering and conducive to self-reflection and discussion. Feedback on the study materials confirmed that the language and

timing of the research were appropriate within the current sociopolitical context. A gender-fluid person suggested aesthetic improvements to the recruitment material, such using more colour and including LGBTQ+ flags. A participating school expressed support for the project and noted that the Photovoice method would likely engage students.

Data Analysis

Epistemological Position

This study is underpinned by a critical realist perspective (Bhaskar, 1975), which acknowledges the existence of an objective reality, which is accessed and interpreted in individual ways through language, culture and social interaction. Thus, participants' accounts are understood as meaningful interpretations of their experiences, which can provide insight into both the lived experience and underlying generative mechanisms that shape them. Critical realism offers a suitable foundation for this study, supporting the exploration of individual experiences while also attending to wider social and structural influences.

Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a university approved transcriber (n=11) and the researcher (n=1). The interview data were analysed inductively according to the six iterative stages outlined in Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive notes were taken during and immediately after each interview, supporting the researcher's engagement with emerging impressions (Appendix G). Familiarisation involved reading the transcripts and making preliminary notes (Appendix H). Initial line-by-line coding was conducted using NVivo software, and was both inductive and interpretive, paying attention to

the semantic content whilst remaining sensitive to latent possible meanings (Appendix I). Coding aimed to generate analytic labels which captured meaningful features of the data.

Codes were exported to Microsoft Excel to facilitate organisation and clustering of ideas. Through a reflexive process of grouping, reorganising and examination of the codes, patterns of shared meaning were constructed into emerging themes (Appendix J). These themes were then reviewed and refined through an iterative process of moving between the coded extracts, full transcripts and evolving themes to ensure there were coherent organising concepts with clear boundaries and links to the research question (Appendix K).

Once finalised, the themes were defined and named and the central organising concept of each theme articulated. A thematic map was produced to visualise the themes and relationships between subthemes (Appendix L). A document was also created which described each theme alongside illustrative quotes to support the development of the analytic narrative (Appendix M).

While participants' photographs themselves were not analysed independently, they are presented in the results section alongside participants' narratives. The images provide context, supporting the interpretation of participants' accounts and enriching the meanings derived from the data.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance was supported through ongoing supervision. The developing codes and themes were discussed with research supervisors, experienced qualitative researchers, to encourage critical reflection, challenge assumptions, and enhance analytic depth. These discussions aimed to support

transparency and reflexivity rather than establish coding consensus, consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Reflexivity and validity

Reflexivity is a crucial component of RTA, requiring researchers to recognise and critically examine their influence on the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To support this, an audit trail was kept in which key decisions and steps were documented, ensuring transparency and rigour. A reflective diary was kept throughout the research process to document and examine preconceptions, assumptions and personal responses to the research (Appendix N). Reflections were discussed with the researcher's supervisors to enhance critical awareness and accountability. To further support reflexivity, Gibbs' (1998) reflective model was used to guide ongoing reflection (Appendix O).

The research aims were co-developed with gender diverse individuals to enhance the validity, relevance, and ethical sensitivity of the study. The research was guided by Yardley's (2008) principles of quality in qualitative research, which informed the design, analysis, and dissemination of the project. Sensitivity to context was maintained by collaborating with gender diverse individuals in shaping the research aims and employing Photovoice to amplify their voices and lived experiences. The researcher maintained a reflexive awareness of the sociopolitical context surrounding gender diversity, which was supported by the researcher's clinical work in a Gender Identity Service.

Commitment and rigour were demonstrated through sustained engagement with participants across the Photovoice and interview stages, and through a detailed, iterative process of RTA. Transparency and coherence were ensured by

documenting methodological and analytical decisions and by maintaining alignment between the participatory aims of Photovoice, the critical realist stance of the research, and the use of RTA.

Finally, the study seeks to demonstrate impact and importance by amplifying the voices of gender diverse individuals, contributing to greater understanding of lived experience, and supporting inclusive practice within community and institutional contexts.

Reflexivity statement

I am a cisgender queer woman and a trainee clinical psychologist. My professional experience in a Gender Identity Service and my commitment to social justice informed my interest in this research. To support rigour, transparency and reflexivity, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice to examine how my assumptions, positionality and emotional responses shaped data collection and analysis, ensuring the findings remained grounded in participants' voices.

Results

Three themes were generated, each comprising several subthemes as illustrated in Figure 1. Participants' photographs illustrate and enrich participants' accounts. The photographs not provided in the following section can be found in Appendix P. Pronouns are used in keeping with gender diverse youths' gender identity.

Figure 1

Themes and Subthemes

```
                                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                    │   Support heavily dependant │
                                    │        on individuals       │
                                    └─────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────┐         ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Institutional support is│         │   Support shaped through    │
│   contingent: "just no  │─────────│   institutional structures  │
│       consistency"      │         └─────────────────────────────┘
└─────────────────────────┘         ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                    │  Support that's rooted in   │
                                    │  understanding: "start      │
                                    │      listening better"      │
                                    └─────────────────────────────┘

                                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                    │  Self-advocating and        │
                                    │  educating others: "who     │
                                    │      else is gonna?"        │
                                    └─────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────┐         ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│   Carrying the burden:  │         │      Self-exploration       │
│ gender diversity within a│────────└─────────────────────────────┘
│  cisnormative framework │         ┌─────────────────────────────┐
└─────────────────────────┘         │          Scrutiny           │
                                    └─────────────────────────────┘
                                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                    │   Navigating strategically  │
                                    └─────────────────────────────┘

                                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                    │   Empathy and action for    │
                                    │           others            │
                                    └─────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────┐         ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Strength through struggle│────────│         Resilience          │
└─────────────────────────┘         └─────────────────────────────┘
                                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                    │          Community          │
                                    └─────────────────────────────┘
```

Institutional support is contingent: "just no consistency"

This theme captures how gender diverse youth experience support as inconsistent, fragile and unevenly distributed in educational institutions. Support was often described as dependant on individual staff or parental advocacy, rather than being embedded into the institution's structure. Participants highlighted how the presence or absence of supportive individuals, alongside the varied features of their institution (e.g., size, subject of study) shaped whether they felt recognised and safe. Thus, access to support within educational institutions was often subject to factors outside of gender diverse youths' control. Youth outlined understanding as the foundation for genuine inclusion.

Support heavily dependent on individuals

Participants' reflections revealed support as contingent on the values and actions of individual staff and sometimes parents, rather than embedded institutional practices. For many participants individuals were the only source of support within their institution, sharing that "as an institution college itself doesn't actually do anything" (Participant 4). Affirming staff created a sense of safety, belonging and possibility, by "asking you about pronouns and preferred names" and putting pride stickers on laptops (Participant 4). One participant shared that he felt "quite safe" armed with the knowledge that his personal tutor was "radically trans positive" (Participant 7). Teachers expanded youth's imagined futures and reduced fears about their trans identity harming their prospects, which was captured by participants 6 and 7 (Figure 2):

It has like opened like my eyes to that I will have more opportunities than I thought I would…. the one thing I was worried about was will being trans

affect my future career at some point….my teacher's, NAME – (teacher), he's been really supportive about the whole thing, he was like…. especially within the Police, they have such a great support system for queer and trans police people, and he's like, 'it's not something you should be worrying about.' (Participant 6)

Figure 2

Participant 7 Photograph with Accompanying Freewrite

Note. The second photo here is of the trans inclusive pride flag in one of the Christchurch courtyards. I've been pushed towards education from being very young, the high school I attended never really pushed academia as an option so I organised my own trips throughout sixth form. This photo was taken during my stay on a north east outreach program at [Southern University], before this trip I was very worried

that I'd have to push my gender identity to one side to be able to get into uni or participate in uni afterwards, so I used my old details on this program. One of the student volunteers was a trans woman from the north east doing her law degree and she was just amazing, she let me know all about the different support networks available at [Southern University] and that it wouldn't be a major issue at all. That's the first time I'd met another trans person in academia and it has shaped how I've experienced university. Even though I didn't end up at [Southern University] the help she gave me was completely transferrable to [Northern University] and I was able to access support that I otherwise wouldn't have known about through my student union.

Support that ultimately "depends on the teacher" (Participant 6) was experienced as fragile. Institutional structures rarely offered consistent protection, meaning that each new academic year required renegotiating disclosure and safety:

I think it just sometimes makes me a bit more nervous and tell people I'm trans …. next year it'll be different teachers mainly….so having to have the whole conversation again, like its just a bit stressful because I'm not always 100% sure how they react. (Participant 6)

Single negative encounters amplified anxiety and shaped expectations of others, with one participant sharing that "even though it was one teacher, [it] made me really nervous around other teachers, of course all these teachers talk, what if she convinces them somehow to do the same" (Participant 6).

Some participants highlighted that access to institutional support was "all based on parental backing" (Participant 7), which exposes inequity, as access to safety depends on factors largely beyond their control. Overall, support rooted in

individuals rather than systems left youth vulnerable to inconsistency which impacted their wellbeing.

Support shaped through institutional structures

Institutional processes and environments also shaped how support was experienced. Administrative processes, such as handling preferred names could either intensify or reduce burden. For one participant, being required to come out to his parents to change his name on the register was "terrifying" and created "distrust" of the education system, during a really difficult time, which he captured in his photograph (Participant 5, Figure 3). In contrast, Participant 6 described a containing administrative process in which his "dead name" was known only to the course head, which "got rid of loads of anxiety". Practical barriers also emerged through oversights in planning, such as inaccessible or poorly signposted toilets and support services that were technically available but difficult to locate creating stress and an unwelcome environment:

> the trans support fund…has been a lifesaver for me…. but it's not advertised... If you find it, you find it… but that's chance…The onus is now on us to be able to find these resources and that's just another stressor. (Participant 7)

Figure 3

Participant 5 Photograph with Accompanying Freewrite
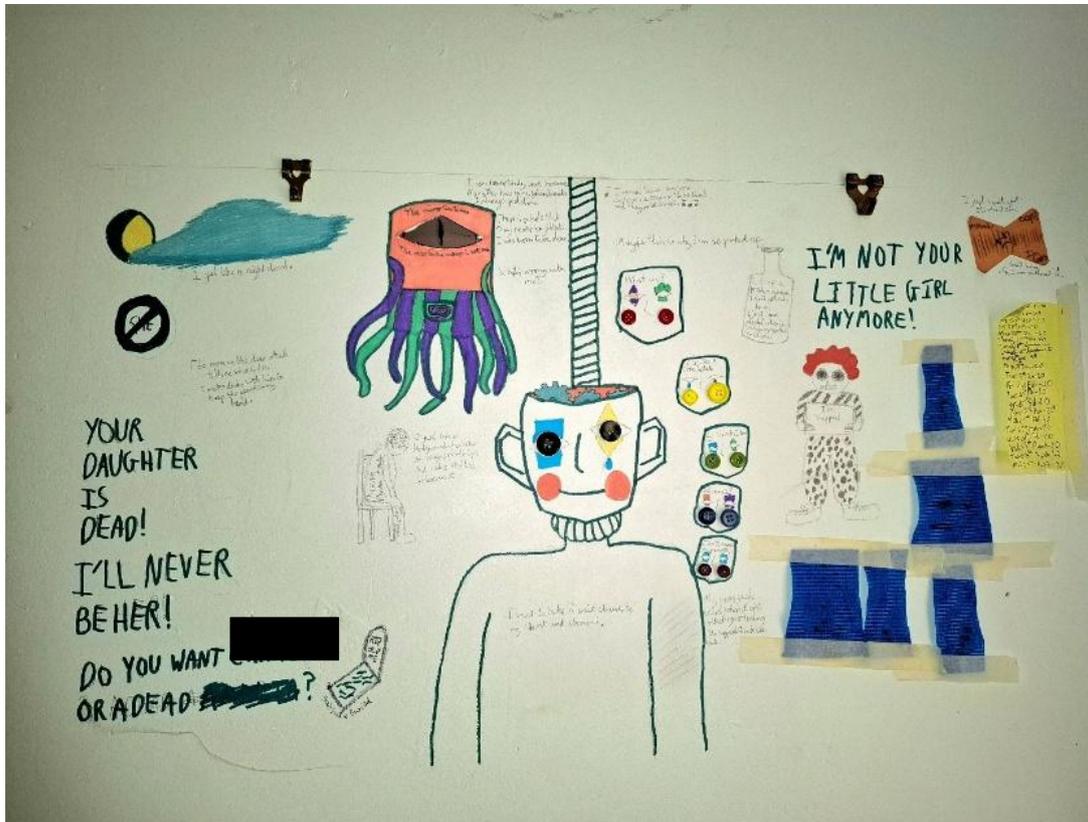
Note. This image is a picture of my bedroom wall, when I was younger I would draw a lot to vent out my frustrations. After I came out to my parents the first year or so was definitely the roughest in my transition journey and my life, my parents didn't really understand or accept me so, I drew on the wall whenever I couldn't tell them my feelings. I feel like this is a perfect visual description of how I was feeling internally, I couldn't say it so instead I wrote it on my wall angrily listening to music. I hide it behind a framed jigsaw puzzle so my mother doesn't see it which feels almost poetic in a sense. It's all out there, but she'll never see it unless she pries.

Efforts towards inclusion including how staff talked about gender diversity sometimes felt well-intentioned but othering: "That makes me feel a little bit like

some sort of mythical creature and not a person…I want it to be normal, I don't want it to be a special extra bit" (Participant 7). There was felt to be a disconnect and lack of consideration for the challenges facing gender diverse youth, with one participant reflecting:

> people in charge of college won't do anything about it because it's not a thought for them, whereas if they were to be a little bit more educated, they might understand more and then make those little changes. (Participant 12)

Participants described wanting inclusion where their identities were normalised rather than marked as different. This was felt by many to be more achievable in college compared to school, where fewer binary gender divisions created more space for authenticity, and within more "alternative" or creative courses which attracted diverse peers, compared to more traditionally gendered subjects like "bricklaying" (Participant 11). Together, these accounts illustrate how institutional structures, design and culture shape whether support feels embedded and accessible, or precarious, hidden and dependant on personal navigation.

Support that's rooted in understanding: "start listening better"

Participants emphasised that meaningful support depended on staff understanding and willingness to listen. Staff awareness of the challenges youth faced shaped whether interactions felt safe and affirming. When staff lacked basic understanding, participants described feeling dismissed or unseen, whereas moments of genuine listening and empathy were experienced as deeply supportive. One participant reflected:

> it's great having the mental health support team… but if just teachers just had the basic understanding of how like their actions can affect people, it would be

a lot easier, instead of… constantly having to go to someone else or go to

them to explain. (Participant 6)

Across accounts, institutional support was perceived as limited by the variable

relational competence of those implementing it. Participants shared that "some staff

members are very much well educated" and understanding, while others "don't really

bother" (Participant 12). Lack of awareness increased the emotional labour required

of young people to advocate for themselves. These accounts illustrate how listening

and understanding are felt to be the foundation of support, and how their absence

shifts burden onto gender diverse youth which is explored further in the following

theme.

Carrying the burden: gender diversity within a cisnormative framework

This theme explores how gender diverse youth carry the burden of self-

advocacy and educating others in educational institutions, whilst simultaneously

making sense of their own identities. In the absence of consistent institutional

support, participants described expending significant effort strategically navigating

environments to ensure their safety and recognition. These acts of agency were

often necessary within systems shaped by cisnormative assumptions, yet they also

demanded considerable emotional and cognitive labour.

Self-advocating and educating others: "who else is gonna?"

Young people described routinely having to explain, correct or justify their

identities within institutions. This often involved repeatedly clarifying names and

pronouns, challenging gendered language and navigating administrative systems

that failed to account for gender diversity. Self-advocacy was experienced as

necessary for securing recognition and belonging, which incurred a cost, including

stress and anxiety. One participant reflected: "I feel like I'm always having to like explain myself… I wish I could just say 'oh Google it', but I feel kind of obliged to educate people about it because who else is gonna" (Participant 2).

Youth described being positioned as educators, experts and representatives of the trans community, roles which placed additional pressure on youth to respond politely, correct mistakes gently and represent gender diverse people in a positive light. Participant 1 described the "repeating motif" of advising college on how to be more inclusive as "tiresome" and expressed wanting college to "start doing it without our help". Another participant was requested to lead a seminar due to their trans identity: "seminarists didn't have a clue… that was beyond draining. I found that quite difficult" (Participant 7). The energy expended on educating was burdensome for participants: "sometimes I want to be there to learn, I don't want to be there to teach" (Participant 10). Participants highlighted how their experiences contrasted those of their cisgender peers, who were not expected to fill the gaps by being "an expert in how the administrative process works", being a "community ambassador" (Participant 7) or teaching staff about gender diversity. Participants' accounts demonstrate that self-advocacy is both a strategy for safety and a burden, creating additional stress and expectation for gender diverse youth.

Self-exploration

Alongside advocating and educating others, participants described the ongoing work of understanding and articulating their gender identities. This process was emotionally demanding, shaped by reflection, experimentation, and negotiation with internalised societal pressures. One participant explained:

Gender-fluid has taken me a while to find out, it's taken me seven bloody

years… I shouldn't be feeling this guilt with wanting to socially transition….

I've got lot of internalised transphobias, I've worked through (Participant 1)

Across participants, identity development was described as iterative (Figure

4), involving trial and error of different expressions and building their sense of self

over time (Figure 5). Participants 12 and 10 visually represented the path to

discovering who they are (Figure 6) and barriers they have experienced (Figure 7),

but also the "beauty that comes after going against society's idea of what identity

and gender have to be" (Participant 10, Figure 8). Participant 3 and 11 use imagery

to convey the multiple facets that constitute who they are, including where they grew

up (Figure 9), the people they've encountered and the experiences that have shaped

them (Figure 10). Participant 11 reflected:

> people wanna say that erm you know trans people just shove it in other
>
> people's faces and it's not all there is to you but actually, you know when we
>
> discuss it, like you cant just be trans and have it not effect you which is why it
>
> is definitely such a big part of my identity.

Figure 4

Participant 6 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. Photo two of the moon: I have always loved the moon and associated the way

it changes with how I am always changing (sometimes for the better or for the worse)

the different phases represent the different phases of my life and how they have

shaped me to be who I am today :)

Figure 5

Participant 4 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. Photo 1 is my favourite outfit at the moment. It's all handmade by me. It symbolises how I've built up my identity from scratch as that is how i see being transgender. Also the big patch directly shows support for the queer community.

Figure 6

Participant 12 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite
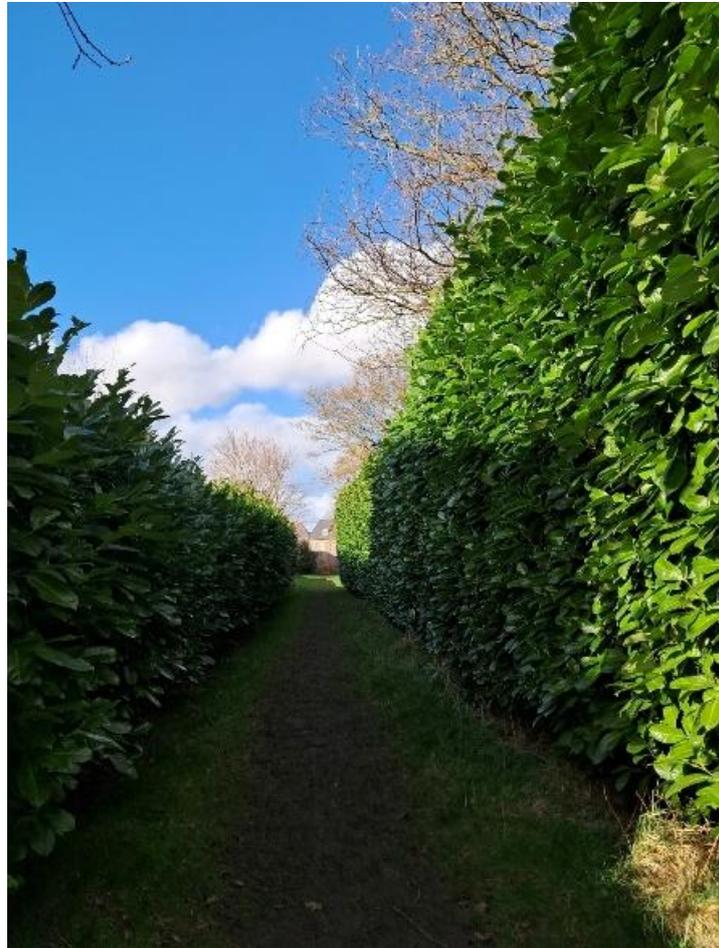
Note. Photograph 2- This photograph represents my identity as I feel like I'm on a path and I'm slowly finding out more about who I am as I go along. There are things that make it hard to see where I'm going to end up (hedges) and I am constantly learning more about my identity and finding new ways to express myself as I go along my path. The further I go the more I can see and the more confident I become.

Figure 7

Participant 10 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. This first photo I took while I was thinking about the barriers leaving identity can have whist also thinking about the beauty that comes after going against societies idea of what identity and gender have to be.

Figure 8

Participant 10 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite
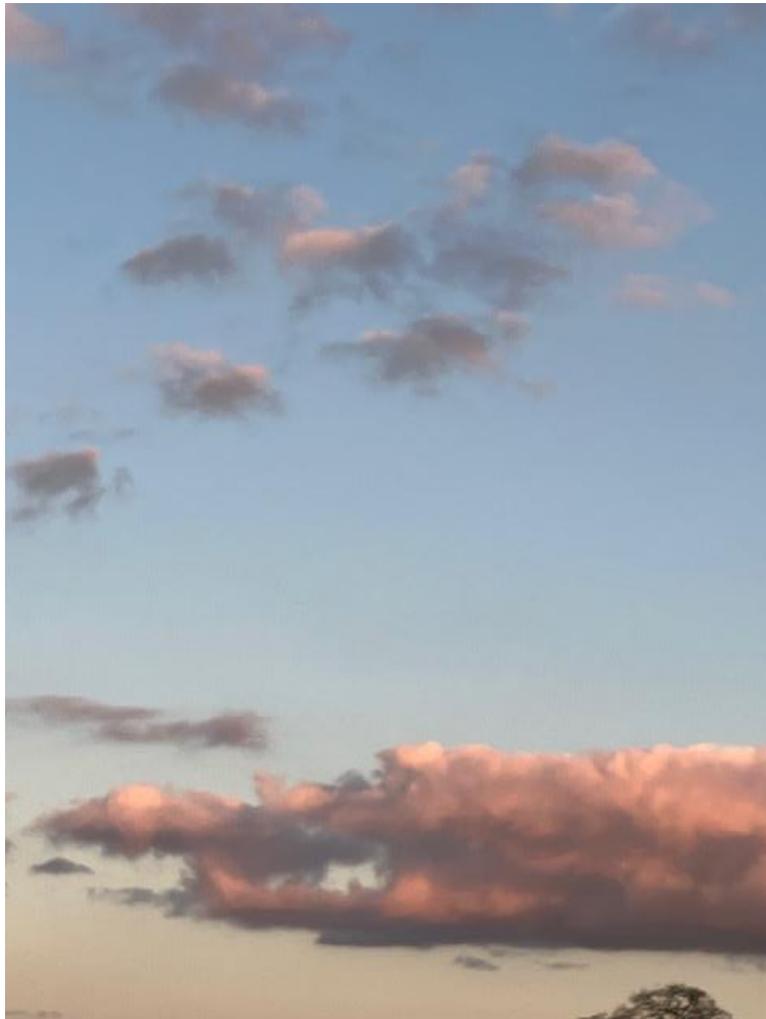
Note. This second photo feels like freedom to me. When I first thought about what pictures I might take I thought of a clouded sky in pink white and blue to represent the trans flag. In terms of identity it portrays the meaning of looking beyond what people want from you and living for yourself freely.

Figure 9

Participant 3 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. I think identity is more than how we feel, but also where we have grown up and lived, so I photographed a section of ruin that used to be part of the [Northern city] walls.

Figure 10

Participant 11 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. These photos that I've taken represent identity to me because they include objects I've collected/received over the years (that now live in my room) from different people and experiences that have shaped me as a person, including events, hobbies, and gifts from past relationships that once meant something to me.

Thus, self-exploration occurs not in isolation, but within environments influenced by cisnormative expectations, where societal attitudes and institutional structures influence gender diverse youth's ability to explore who they are.

Scrutiny

Participants described being placed under an uncomfortable spotlight in which their trans identity dominated interactions, often overshadowing their needs:

> the main problems would be those implicit biases, things being directed to you in a way where people aren't trying to be offensive and they're trying to be really accepting, but it's kind of just a bit uncomfortable… in my one-to-one sessions I have with my head tutor, like the head of my course, she will often focus on me being trans and that's an issue when it might be like, "I'm just struggling at the minute for other reasons" And it will always come back to, "how are you feeling about being trans" (Participant 10)

The attention around participants' gender identity was "really tiring", "intrusive", explaining "it makes you feel like you're not a person…like you're an alien… like you're a test object or like a zoo animal being poked" (Participant 5). Participants reflected on broader societal narratives which positioned trans people as controversial or even suspicious, overlooking their achievements and focussing on their presence as a "diversity ploy" or "'they are gonna infect our children with their transgenderness'" (Participant 8). Participant 8 captured this scrutiny in his photography which depicts a chest binder with the word 'human?' attached to it (Figure 11). Participant 2 captured a sense of non-binary erasure in their image (Figure 12).

Figure 11

Participant 8 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. Subjective humanity.

Figure 12

Participant 2 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. The second one I think shows a different, more negative side to being non

binary, and I tried to encapsulate the feeling when I see or hear something that

reminds me that not everyone agrees with my views or even accepts my existence

as a non binary person.

Scrutiny shaped how participants navigated educational institutions, with many describing "constant worrying about…. how you're being perceived by people" (Participant 10) and adjusting their self-presentation to minimise misgendering or unwanted attention. Visibility could offer affirmation but also intensify vulnerability when others' perceptions did not align with participants' identities. Overall, scrutiny reinforced cisnormative expectations, contributing to emotional labour of navigating educational institutions.

Navigating strategically

Participants described making purposeful decisions about when and how to be visible, continuously weighing authenticity against safety. This strategic navigation of educational institutions involved assessing social cues, adjusting how they dress and deciding whether to disclose their gender identity in different contexts: "do I be visibly queer or not, do I fight for myself and my people or not?...If I'm doing nothing it's like slowly eating me up inside" (Participant 9).

Visibility was described as a dynamic process shaped by perceived risk. Some participants minimised visibility when they felt more vulnerable by choosing more muted clothing or avoiding wearing trans-affirming patches. Participants identified finding "safe spaces" (Participant 11) in specific departments or around particular peers or staff members, and avoided spaces in other areas that didn't feel safe. Many youth described developing heightened awareness and vigilance as a strategy for safety: "Its being aware of social cues…knowing when its safe to come out because there have been times when I've misread social cues….and it's been like you could feel the tone shift instantly" (Participant 1).

These accounts emphasise the ongoing labour involved in navigating cisnormative environments, where visibility is constantly assessed, to preserve safety, belonging and self-expression.

Strength through struggle

This theme captures how gender diverse youth transform experiences of adversity into resilience, agency and community, drawing strength from challenges and using them to foster change for themselves and others.

Empathy and action for others

Participants' own experiences of exclusion and hardship fostered a strong sense of empathy and a commitment to supporting others. Many participants channelled their experiences of marginalisation into creating safer spaces and advocating for others (Figure 13):

> creating safe spaces has definitely been a big part… I am heavily assuming came from the fact that my safe space was irradicated from me as soon as I got into the school… So that need to build safe spaces and a need for everyone to actually be equal (Participant 1)

Figure 13

Participant 9 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite

Note. The UK is becoming an increasingly unsafe place to be trans in recent years, which has made exploring my own identity feel incredibly threatening. This mural can be found in [North of England] and reminded me of an experience I had in college talking about the LGBT and specifically talking to cis people about how to navigate meeting a trans person. It was a small chat with a small group of people, but that

conversation could have a huge knock on effect as they enter the world and meet a variety of other people. Making change doesn't have to be huge revolutionary action, it can be the little things too, and we are all capable of making history.

Visibility was not only a process shaped by perceived risk, but also an intentional act of care which modelled authenticity and signalled belonging. One participant shared, "I keep going as much as I can, I try to be as resilient as I can and I try to be seen and I try to be visible" (Participant 4). Several participants described being loud to advocate for their peers when possible:

> people kind of bully me for my gender identity, it's made it much more important for me to be there for other people who are struggling…. I've wanted to be kind of an advocate for people who are struggling….I'm in a space where I can be sure of myself and be loud about it (Participant 2)

These accounts demonstrate participants' strength and empathy-driven action, alongside a desire to promote safety, inclusion and solidarity within their educational environments.

Resilience

Participants' reflections revealed resilience emerged through the challenges they faced, framing strength as both empowering and deeply entwined with experiences of marginalisation:

> I think its understanding that that strength has arrived because…..it comes from a place of trauma, from hurt, from pain against you, it's just claiming that…like you did that to me, you've made me more powerful, now you're gonna have to live with those consequences of making our community angry…. strength has come with oppression. (Participant 1)

Resilience was portrayed as something cultivated through repeated encounters with misunderstanding, backlash or exclusion: "I've been out for four years, I'm kind of used to like… not having understanding or…. when I come out to new people been there being a bit of a backlash" (Participant 6). Thus, resilience operated as both a survival strategy and a burden: "I think resilient is probably... I've had to go through a lot to be able to live as openly as I do." (Participant 7)

Community

Across participants' accounts, community emerged as a vital source of affirmation, belonging, collective strength and an adaptive response to educational and societal contexts where support was fragile (Figure 14):

> we've got this sense of community but it's born out of the fact that the… outlining society doesn't accept us and will possibly never accept us if they don't buck up their act (LAUGH). Erm so… it's our reclaiming of some control we can have over our lives and our identities knowing that it's going to be hard for us to keep that up if we've not got each other there. (Participant 1)

Figure 14

Participant 1 Photograph and Accompanying Freewrite
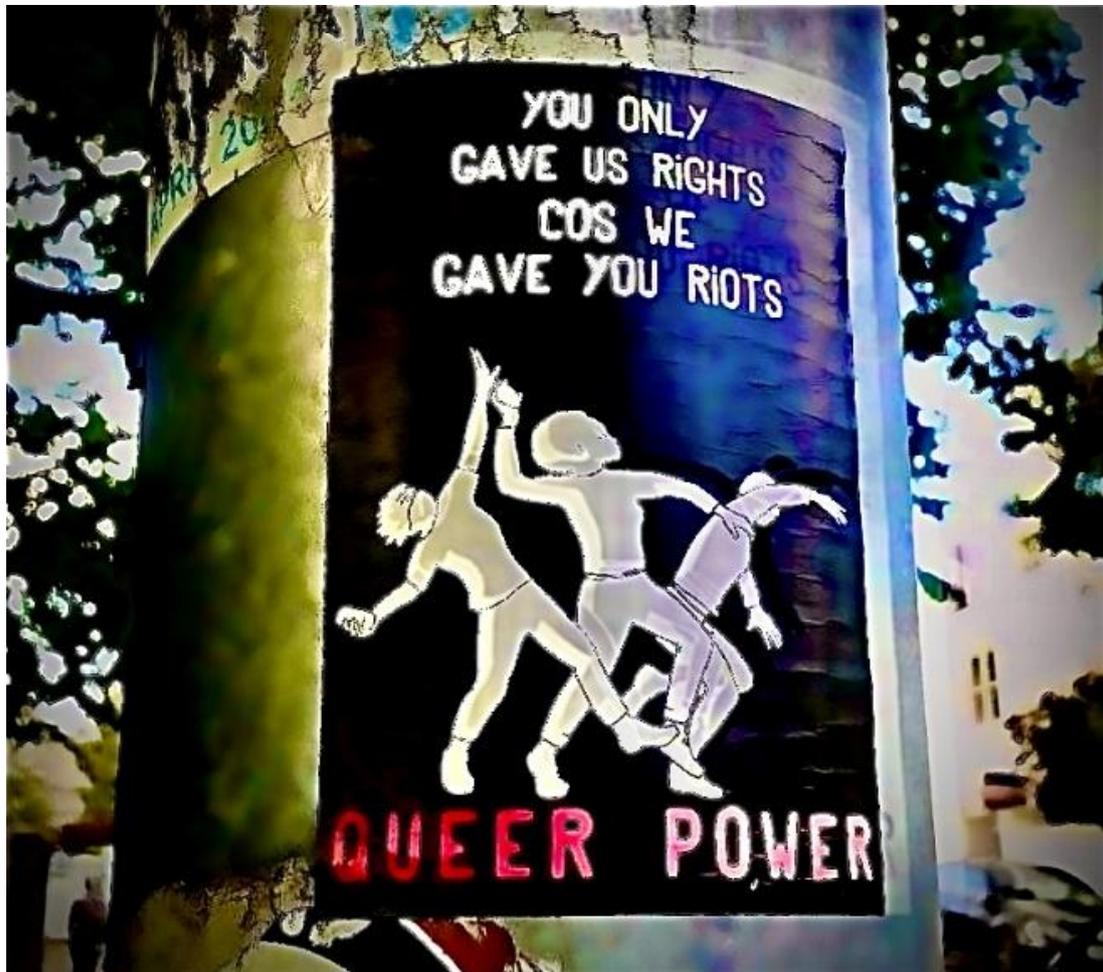
Note. I chose this as it is something that make people who don't understand angry upon seeing it simply because of the fact that they do not understand, mirroring societies general outlook to people like me, however I also chose it for the fact that it displays the unity within the queer community and the power we hold within our acceptance of identity and the ability to carve out the safe spaces we need despite the systematic oppression we've often faced. Use of editing to create a hallucinogenic atmosphere to garner the sense of warped reality when people see posters like this as a lot usually end up reiterating common statements like "well it's

better than it used to be" as to people who don't understand the gravity of our situations will often think that we are in safety.

Community offered safety, countering the politicisation and scrutiny that participants often encountered elsewhere. Being surrounded by other gender diverse people provided affirmation and enabled authentic expression:

> I would say the main benefit from school is the friends that I've made because they've helped me discover who I am like and feel sure in my identity….I think without having such a strong secure friend group it wouldn't have been as easy for me. (Participant 2)

Together, these accounts highlight how peer and community connections function as protective and empowering spaces which help to mitigate broader societal stigma.

Discussion

This study sought to develop a deeper understanding of how gender diverse youth experience educational institutions in relation to their identities. Across the themes, the findings demonstrate how institutions, which are largely structured through cisnormative assumptions, are often ill-equipped to consistently support gender diverse youth. Consequently, young people must work hard to secure safety, recognition and belonging, burdens only partially alleviated by supportive staff, circumstantial institutional characteristics, or the communities that they create. The educational system places responsibility for inclusion onto gender diverse youth themselves, creating an additional burden. While youth demonstrate strength and resilience, these capacities have been forged through adversity and come at an emotional cost.

The findings corroborate and deepen existing understandings of how educational institutions create inequitable and contingent forms of support that depend on the knowledge and values of individual staff, circumstantial institutional conditions and the self-advocacy of gender diverse youth. Prior research has shown that institutional cisnormativity, grounded in assumptions of a fixed gender binary, contributes to the marginalisation of gender diverse youth, producing experiences of exclusion and compromised safety (Miller, 2016). The current findings align with research demonstrating the harmful effects of cisnormative institutional conditions such as administrative process that omit chosen names (McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Sausa, 2005), binary gender uniforms (Jones et al, 2016), gendered facilities (Devís-Devís et al, 2018), non-inclusive curriculum (Peter et al, 2016) and gender normative language (Jones et al, 2016). Furthermore, previous research has shown that young people's experiences of support within educational institutions are shaped by how gender normative their course of study is (Pryor, 2015), a pattern reflected in the present findings where participants described feeling more recognised and supported in less gender normative or more alternative subject areas.

Educators' lack of understanding of gender diversity has been identified as a barrier to support which contributes to social exclusion and deteriorated mental health (Day & Brömdal, 2024), aligning with the present findings that staff knowledge varied and shaped whether interactions felt safe. At the same time, these findings are consistent with evidence that affirming staff advocacy and support can enhance safety and belonging (McGuire et al, 2010; Smith et al, 2014). The findings align with a recent review which found that while many young people could identify at least one supportive staff member, far fewer experienced trans-specific policies, trans-inclusive subject material, or access to LGBT youth groups (McBride, 2021). Consequently,

support within educational institutions remains fragile and contingent on individuals rather than embedded into systemic practice, placing disproportionate burden on gender diverse youth to self-advocate.

The findings suggest that cisnormativity underpins the lack of consistent structural support, transferring the burden of inclusion and safety onto gender diverse youth, who must carry these demands while navigating identity development amid scrutiny, transphobia and stigma. This aligns with research showing gender diverse youth often undertake additional labour to inform their teachers and administrators how to address them using trans-affirming language (Singh et al, 2013), a process frequently experienced as exhausting and painful (Austin, 2016). The findings also align with literature observing that gender diverse youth are routinely positioned as educators within educational institutions, a role similarly characterised as draining and burdensome (McBride & Neary, 2021).

Gender diverse youth carry additional burdens arising from the scrutiny they encounter within educational institutions, which often necessitate strategic navigation to preserve safety, belonging and self-expression. These dynamics can be understood as a product of cisnormativity, which shapes the conditions under which visibility becomes both risky and effortful. This pattern aligns with the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), which proposes that chronic stress arising from marginalisation contributes to heightened vulnerability to adverse mental health outcomes (Testa et al, 2015). Existing research documents youths' exposure to invasive questions (McBride & Neary, 2021) and their concern about how they are perceived by teachers and peers (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006). As in the present study, youth often negotiate their visibility to enhance safety, a strategy which can increase isolation and undermine feelings of authenticity (Johns et al, 2021). The emotional

costs of this strategy are well established, with studies linking visibility management to heightened anxiety, hypervigilance, isolation (Ehrensaft, 2013; Pryor, 2015) and reduced access of support (Rasberry et al, 2021), all of which were evident in participants' accounts.

The present findings reflect complexity which was identified in McBride and Neary's (2021) application of the vulnerability-in-resistance model (Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay 2016). In resisting cisnormativity and mobilising their voices, youth simultaneously expose themselves to further risk. Their efforts to secure recognition and challenge inequity can heighten vulnerability to discrimination and microaggressions, thereby amplifying minority stress (Meyer, 2003). This interconnectedness of resilience, vulnerability and resistance emphasises that the strength observed in gender diverse youth is not cost free but emerges within structural conditions which require them to work hard for their own and others safety, belonging and recognition.

In summary, and from a critical realist perspective, cisnormativity operates as a core underlying mechanism which shapes the way educational institutions are structured, operated and consequently navigated by gender diverse youth (McBride, 2021). Structural manifestations of cisnormativity, such as administrative processes organised around gender binaries, gender binary facilities, gender normative language and curricula, create conditions in which understanding of gender diversity is limited. Within this context, youth often find themselves needing to educate others, self-advocate and strategically navigate their environment. These structural pressures are amplified by cultural norms and a shifting socio-political climate marked by heightened scrutiny and polarised debate around gender diversity in school (Weale, 2023). Such cultural forces further intensify the labour described by

participants, who must continuously anticipate and manage how they will be perceived. While youth demonstrate considerable resilience, these capacities are, at least in part, developed in response to structural absences and cultural marginalisation and incur the cost of increased vulnerability to further scrutiny. Taken together, these findings highlight the need for systemic change, in which the institution takes responsibility and absorbs the burden of inclusion currently carried by gender diverse youth. This is particularly crucial given the elevated rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation reported among gender diverse youth compared to their cisgender counterparts (Austin et al, 2020; Bränström & Pachankis; 2021; de Graaf et al, 2021).

This study offers several important contributions to understandings of gender diverse youths' experiences of educational institutions. The findings support emerging knowledge by illustrating how cisnormativity operates pervasively across physical structures (e.g., toilets), institutional processes (e.g., administrative systems), cultural norms and everyday interactions, in a way that cumulatively shapes youth's access to safety and support (McBride, 2021). Notably, the findings illuminate the fragility and contingency of support, which frequently relies on individual staff, circumstantial features of institutions and the self-advocacy of youth themselves. This adds nuance to the existing literature, by showing how systemic gaps shift the labour of inclusion onto youth, with consequences for their mental health. The study also contributes to the developing understanding of the dynamic interplay between vulnerability and resistance, illustrating how the actions youth take to be recognised can simultaneously heighten exposure to scrutiny and minority stress.

Clinical implications

A key strength of this study is the broader clinical psychology perspective underpinning the research, which attends not only to interpersonal dynamics but also to systems, care pathways and institutional contexts shaping gender diverse youths' experiences. This lens also highlights the importance of working within and across services and systems to foster trust and engagement.

The findings have important implications for clinical psychologists and other professionals working with gender diverse youth across healthcare, educational and community settings. Clinical psychologists, with expertise in systemic formulation, psychological theory (e.g., minority stress), identity development and interdisciplinary collaboration, are well positioned to support change at both individual and organisational levels.

A key implication concerns the need to challenge structural conditions that place disproportionate burden on gender diverse youth. Clinical psychologists can work with educational institutions to review and adapt cisnormative practices such as administrative systems, uniform policies, facilities and gendered language, which currently require youth to self-advocate to secure safety and belonging. Through consultation, organisational formulation and staff training, clinical psychologists can support institutions to adopt inclusive practices that reduce reliance on individual staff members and increase consistency of support.

Clinical psychologists can lead or support the development of mandatory training for staff and students. Training informed by the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) can increase awareness of the psychological impact of misgendering, scrutiny

and visibility management and help educators recognise the emotional burden youth often carry.

Within their therapeutic roles, clinical psychologists should validate the structural and interpersonal burdens faced by gender diverse youth, formulate distress within wider sociopolitical contexts, and support identity exploration without pathologising diversity. They can help youth cultivate self-compassion, agency and connection, while working with families and schools to improve understanding and consistency of support. Close collaboration with educational institutions is essential to ensure therapeutic progress is not inadvertently undermined by educational environments.

Finally, Clinical psychologists can strengthen inclusive wellbeing pathways by providing consultation, developing links with schools, charities and community groups, and advocating for accessible, affirming support. Across systemic and therapeutic work, emphasis should be placed on fostering resilience through nourishment, empowerment and safe community, rather than through adversity.

Strengths, limitations and future directions

This study contributes to an emerging body of literature capturing the nuance, complexity and burden involved in gender diverse youths' navigation of cisnormative educational institutions. A key strength was the deliberately broad and proactive recruitment strategy, which enabled inclusion of a diverse group of participants during a period of heightened sociopolitical scrutiny regarding gender diversity. Recruiting through educational institutions, the third sector, organisations serving gender diverse youth, and social media was effective in reaching youth willing to share their experiences. The incorporation of Photovoice further enriched the

process, facilitating deeper interview conversations and supporting the interpretation of the data. Future research would benefit from utilising and extending similarly multi-layered recruitment strategies and creative methods such as Photovoice.

It is important to consider how the use of Photovoice may have shaped the data generated. Inviting participants to represent their identity through photographs may have contributed to a greater emphasis on internal and relational processes, such as self-exploration, over more detailed accounts of institutional practices and educational environments. Future research may benefit from Photovoice prompts more explicitly anchored to specific settings to support exploration of both personal and contextual dimensions.

While recruitment was successful, future studies may benefit from increased community engagement. Despite efforts to liaise with charities and community organisations, a sustained working relationship was established with only one charity through an existing professional contact. Within the current sociopolitical climate, stronger collaborative relationships may enhance relational safety for both organisations and youth, supporting participation from those less likely to engage with unfamiliar researchers. This is crucial for ensuring that a broader range of experiences are represented.

Participants in the current study were predominantly white and primarily attending college rather than school or university. Future research would therefore benefit from collaborative community embedded methodologies focussed on recruiting racially minoritised groups at different stages in education, drawing on the principles of Participatory Action Research to strengthen trust, accessibility and representation. Exploring educators' experiences of navigating ambiguous or

changing government guidance around supporting gender diverse youth may also support a more comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape where youth spend so much of their time.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that support within educational institutions is fragile, and heavily contingent on the values of individual staff and circumstantial institutional characteristic. As a result, gender diverse youth are rendered responsible for navigating their educational environments safely, a process which involves ongoing labour and cumulative stress which has direct implications for their mental health. Resilience is cultivated through adversity, but not without an associated cost of heightened vulnerability.

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Appendix

Appendix A

University of Sheffield Ethics Committee Approval letter

Elizabeth Warden
Registration number: 210154836
Psychology
Programme: Doctorate in Clinical Psychology

Dear Elizabeth

PROJECT TITLE: Experiences of Accessing Educational Institutions in Relation to the Identities of Gender DiverseYouth
APPLICATION: Reference Number 051860

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 31/05/2023 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 051860 (form submission date: 31/05/2023); (expected project end date: 31/10/2025).
- Participant information sheet 1120293 version 1 (18/04/2023).
- Participant information sheet 1120294 version 1 (18/04/2023).
- Participant consent form 1120295 version 2 (31/05/2023).

The following amendments to this application have been approved:

- Amendment approved: 24/01/2025
- Amendment approved: 02/08/2024

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Department Of Psychology Research Ethics Committee
Ethics Admin
Psychology

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Admin (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix B

Study Advert

RESEARCH VOLUNTEERS WANTED

Gender diverse youth: exploration of identity and school/college/university experiences

My name is Elizabeth Ann (she/her) and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Sheffield. As part of my thesis, I would like to explore the experiences of gender diverse youth, whose gender identity **does not** match sex assigned at birth. **All gender identities are welcome!**

Attending education institutions (e.g., school, college, university) can impact how we see and feel about ourselves. I am interested in finding out more about these experiences and how they affect people.

Many people find taking photographs to be a good way of expressing themselves and their experiences.
I will be inviting participants to:
-**take (1-2) photographs** of the world around them (not of themselves or other people) which **reflect/communicate something important about their identity**.
- Followed by an **interview with myself** (face-to-face or virtual) about the participant's photograph(s) and their experiences of school/college.

'Shifting'

In order to take part you need to:
- be aged **16-25**
- be **in education** (i.e., go to school/college/university etc)
- feel that your **gender identity does not match sex assigned at birth**
- have access to a **camera phone**
- be able to **communicate in English**

Please **email me** if you have any questions and/or you are interested in taking part.

My email address is:
ewarden1@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you are interested in taking part, we can organise a time to chat and I will provide more information about the study and answer any questions you may have.

There will be a **£10 amazon voucher** offered to participants upon completion of the interview for the contribution of their time.

Appendix C

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet - Version 4 24/01/25

Study title: An Exploration of Gender Diverse Youth's Experiences of Educational

Institutions in Relation to their Identity

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you agree to

participate, it is important that you understand what your participation will involve.

Please read the following information carefully.

Who am I?

My name is Elizabeth Ann (she/her) and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist based

at the University of Sheffield. I am an ally to the trans and gender diverse community,

and I feel that it is really important that your voice is heard. The findings of this

research will be written up and published, which I hope will have important

implications for how systems such as educational institutions (e.g.,

schools/college/university) and services can support gender diverse youth.

It is important to know that should you decide to take part, I will not judge you or

seek to undermine you. Your contributions will be treated with utmost respect.

What is the research about?

This study is being completed as part of a Clinical Psychology Doctorate thesis. I am interested in exploring identity and school/college/university experiences from the perspective of gender diverse youth (i.e., gender identity does not match sex assigned at birth). All gender identities are welcome to take part. Navigating educational institutions (e.g., school, college, university etc) can impact how we see ourselves (e.g., our values, goals and beliefs), and I would like to learn more about these experiences. Many people find taking photographs to be a good way of expressing themselves and their experiences. This research involves taking photographs of the world around you (not of yourself or other people) which represent/are symbolic of/communicate something important about your identity. This study is being funded by the University of Sheffield Clinical Psychology department and ethical approval has been gained from the University Department of Psychology Ethics Committee.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are aged 16-25, currently in education, and your gender identity does not match sex assigned at birth. We also ask that participants have access to a camera phone in order to take part.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you whether you would like to participate. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You are free to withdraw your consent at any point in the study up until one week after you complete the interview. A timescale of one week after the interview is given because I will start anonymising the

interviews shortly after the interview is completed. There will be no consequence if you withdraw, and you do not have to give a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide to take part you will be invited to:

-meet with me (virtually) so that I can provide more information about the study. This is also an opportunity to ask any questions.

-take photographs on your camera phone over a period of 1-2 weeks which reflect/communicate something important about your identity. Use the world around you as your inspiration, but please do not take photographs of yourself or other people. For example, if when thinking about my identity (e.g., values, goals and beliefs) I feel trapped and unable to express myself fully I might take a picture of a cloudy sky which is hiding the light from the sun. Or if I feel that a big part of who I am is being able to speak my mind openly, I might take a picture of birds who sing whenever they please. Be as creative as you like, just remember not to take pictures of yourself as other people.

-choose one or two of these photographs which you feel best represent your identity and write a short description for the photograph(s).

-send the photograph(s) together with their description to me by email (ewarden1@sheffield.ac.uk).

-meet me in person or virtually (Google Meet) for an informal interview about your photograph(s) and experiences of education (school/college/univeristy etc), which is expected to last around one hour. The interview will be recorded using a recording

device (for in person interview) or by Google Meet (virtual interview), and transcribed by myself and/or a University of Sheffield approved transcriber.

-following study completion, participants will be offered a £10 amazon voucher for the contribution of your time.

What are the potential benefits and risks of taking part?

The research offers the opportunity to share and reflect on personal experiences, which participants may find valuable. There is also a risk that taking part will be emotionally distressing due to the potentially sensitive nature of discussions around experiences and identity. If you experience any distress while sharing your experiences, you will be asked if you want to continue and will be offered signposting for further support.

What happens to the information I provide?

-Identifiable information (e.g., names) will be kept safe and strictly confidential, and will not be used in any reports or publications.

-The only reason I would need to break confidentiality is if during the interview I became concerned about a risk of harm to yourself (e.g., suicidal risk), or someone else you talk about (e.g., risk of neglect or physical harm). In such cases I would aim to discuss with you the need to break confidentiality. For example, this may involve notifying the relevant service(s) of the situation.

-All photographs and their accompanying descriptions, audio recordings of interviews and transcripts will be stored in accordance with university data security guidelines (e.g., on secure University of Sheffield servers) and data protection regulation laws.

This information will only be accessed by myself, research supervisor and a University of Sheffield approved transcriber.

-It is standard practice at the University of Sheffield for research data to be retained for a period of 10 years, after which it will be securely destroyed.

The audio recordings, however, will be retained for the purpose of the write up of the doctoral thesis and publication, after which they will be securely destroyed.

-I intend to include photographs, their anonymised descriptions and anonymised sections of the transcripts in the doctoral thesis which will be publicly available on an online repository. Aspects of the photographs may be blurred to protect anonymity.

-Anonymised sections of transcripts, photographs and their descriptions may be available to academic journals and charities following the write up of the work.

What if I would like to complain about the way the study has been carried out?

In the first instance, please contact the lead researcher, Elizabeth Ann Warden (ewarden1@sheffield.ac.uk). Alternatively, you can contact the research supervisor for the project, Dr Jaime Delgadillo (j.delgadillo@sheffield.ac.uk).

If you do not feel your complaint was handled to your satisfaction, you can contact Chris Martin (psy-hod@sheffield.ac.uk), Head of the Psychology Department. You could also contact Rebecca Denniss (psy-ethics@sheffield.ac.uk), University Ethics Chair or Glenn Waller who is the head of CAPU (G.Waller@sheffield.ac.uk).

Additional information about your data

New data protection legislation comes into effect across the EU, including the UK on 25 May 2018; this means that we need to provide you with some further information

relating to how your personal information will be used and managed within this research project.

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. In order to collect and use your personal information as part of this research project, we must have a basis in law to do so. The basis that we are using is that the research is 'a task in the public interest'.

As we will be collecting some data that is defined in the legislation as more sensitive (i.e. information about ethnicity), we also need to let you know that we are applying the following condition in law: that the use of your data is 'necessary for scientific or historical research purposes'.

Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

If you would like to discuss any aspects of the research further, please contact Elizabeth Ann Warden (Trainee Clinical Psychologist) – ewarden1@sheffield.ac.uk. The research supervisors for this project are Dr Jaime Delgadillo (j.delgadillo@sheffield.ac.uk) and Dr Rebecca Yeates.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Appendix D

Consent Form

Study Title: An Exploration of Gender Diverse Youth's Experiences of Educational

Institutions in Relation to their Identity

Participant Consent Form - Version 3 29/01/24

Elizabeth Ann Warden

Trainee Clinical Psychologist

ewarden1@sheffield.ac.uk

University of Sheffield

Department of Psychology

Floor F, Cathedral Court

1 Vicar Lane,

Sheffield S1 2LT

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project:		
I have read and understood the project information sheet Version 4 dated 24/01/25 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer 'No' to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐

I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include taking photographs, as well as participating in an interview which will be recorded using a recording device (for in person interviews) or Google Meet (for virtual interviews). If Google Meet is used for the interview, the video will be deleted once the audio has been extracted.	☐	☐
I understand that I should not take photographs of myself or other people for this research project.	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any point up until one week after I complete the interview. A timescale of one week after the interview is given because the researcher will start anonymising the interviews shortly after the interview is completed. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no negative consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project:		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number/email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐

I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I give permission for the data that I provide to be deposited in the University of Sheffield repository ORDA for a period of 10 years so it can be used for future research and learning.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the research project.	☐	☐
I consent to the images I produce to be used in this study.	☐	☐
I consent to the images and image descriptions I produce to be used in the write up of this study, including in publications and reports that are accessible to the public.	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers:		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant [printed]   Signature   Date

Name of Researcher [printed]   Signature   Date

Appendix E

Interview Guide

-introduce myself and summarise the research, ask if they have any questions

-reiterate confidentiality, right to withdrawal and distress protocol

-summarise the interview, recording process and expected duration of the interview

-collect demographic information

-start interview and notify participant I will start recording

1) What do you **S**ee here? (could you describe the photo?)

2) What's (really) **H**appening here? (invites deeper description of what the photograph represents)

      -what does this image represent/mean to you?

      -does this image represent something special to you?

      -what does this image say about you (identity)? And how you see yourself?

      -was there a particular story that you wanted to share by taking this image?

3) How does this relate to y**O**ur li**fe**? (invites reflection on how the photograph relates to their community)

      -what do you want others to understand about your life when they see this image?

      -why did you decide to take this particular photo?

      -could this image represent something to the broader trans/gender diverse community?

      -is there anything else you'd like to say about this picture?

4) Now you've reflected on the photograph(s), I'm interested in hearing a bit more about how you see yourself?

      -what do you think about when you think about your identity?

-are there any words or ideas that come to mind?

5) How do you see yourself in school/college/university?

-how would you describe your experience in your school/college/university *(in relation to your identity)?*

-has school/college/university *changed/influenced how you feel about yourself (and who you are)?*

-has this had an impact on your mental health?

-has school/college/university *influenced:*

-what is important to you (in life/what matters to you personally?) (values)

-what you want from your life in terms of goals? What you would like to achieve in life? (goals)

-beliefs that are important to you, for example, spiritual, religious or cultural? (beliefs)

-your sense of belonging? (social identity)

-your relationship with others, for example friends/classmates/family? (social identity)

6a) What do you see as the main problems that (exist/) you experience in school/college/university (in relation to your identity)?

7) **W**hy does this problem **e**xist? (Invites reflection on causes of problems or strengths)

-why do you think things happen in this way?

-has it always been this way or has it changed over time?

8) What can we/you or others **D**o about it? (invites reflection on change ideas)

    -how could school/college/university *improve?*

6b) What do you see as the main benefits/strengths that exist/that you experience in school/college/university (in relation to your identity)?

7) Why does this strength **e**xist?

    -why do you think things happen in this way?

    -has it always been this way or has it changed over time?

8) What can we/you or others **D**o about it? (invites reflection on change ideas)

    -how could this be further amplified/harnessed?

Ending interview

-switch off audio recording device

-debrief with participant and ask if they have any questions

-reiterate how the data will be used

-ask participants if they would like a summary of the findings once ready

-collect information needed for voucher and explain the timeframe

Appendix F

Distress Protocol
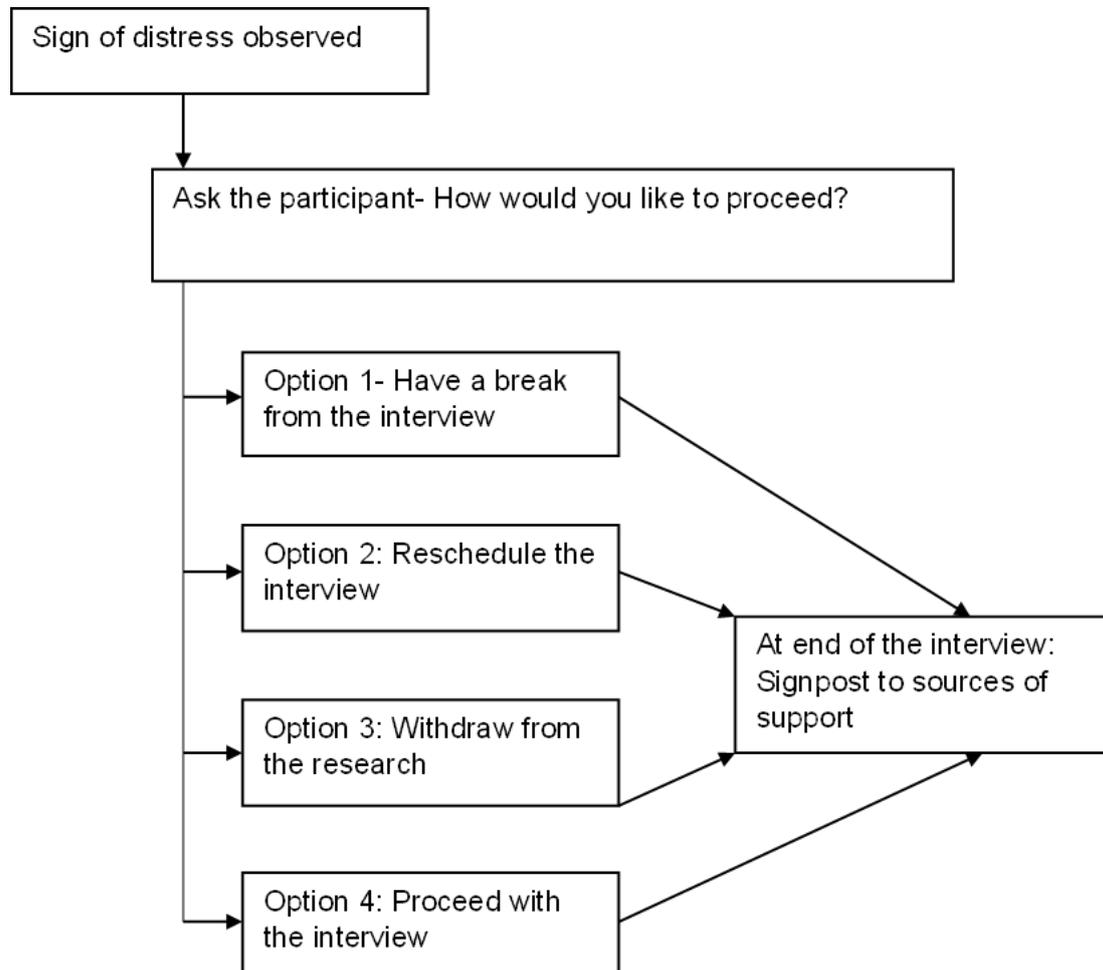
Sources of support:

-Discuss liaising with educational institution if needed

-GP for general mental health support

-Crisis- A&E

-SAYiT- emotional wellbeing support for LGBT young people

-Kooth- online mental wellbeing support for young people

Appendix G

Example of Reflexive Notes Made During and After Semi-Structured Interviews

AIM

The broad aim for the study is to **identify and explore themes** relating to gender diverse youth's **experiences** of educational institutions in relation to their identity.

1) What do you See here? (invites description of the photograph)

2) What's Happening here? (invites deeper description of what the photograph represents)

- does this image represent something special to you?

- what does this image mean/say about/to you?

- why did you decide to take this particular picture?

3) How does this relate to yOur life? (invites reflection on how the photograph relates to their community)

- could this image represent something to the broader trans/gender diverse community?

- what else would you like to say about this picture?

4) Now you've reflected on the photograph, I'm interested in hearing about how you see yourself?

- what do you think about when you think about your identity?

5) How do you see yourself in school?

- has school changed how you feel about yourself?

- has this had an impact on your mental health?

- has school/college influenced:

- what is important to you in life/what matters to you personally? (values)

- what you would like to achieve in your life/what you want from your life in terms of goals? (goals)

- beliefs that are important to you, for example, spiritual, religious or cultural? (beliefs)

- your sense of belonging (social identity)

- your relationship with others, for example friends/classmates/family? (social identity)

6) What do you see as the main benefits and problems that you experience in school?

7) Why does this problem/strength exist? (invites reflection on causes of problems or strengths)

8) What can you or others Do about it? (invites reflection on change ideas)

Appendix H

Example of Preliminary Notes Made during Familiarisation with Interview Transcripts

PO1 Interview

Elizabeth Ann Warden

P: Participant   T: Therapist   ____ overlapping conversation

281   quite obvious, erm so its like its showing that we've got this sense of

282   community but it's born out of the fact that the out, the outlining society

283   doesn't accept us and will possibly never accept us if they don't buck up their

284   act (LAUGH). Erm so sort of that its our reclaiming of some control we can

285   have over our lives and our identities knowing that its going to be hard for us

286   to keep that up if we've not got each other there.

287   T   Yeah wonderful, is there anything you would like to add how this relates to

288   your life?

289   P   I think erm once again being politically motivated, like it's a patch that's right

290   like visibly seen on my onus shorts. I make it my hardest to make my voice

291   heard, I want my voice heard for doing, its very, very funny, we've got to a

292   Year 8 opening evening and there's a student leadership board in the sixth

293   form and I'm the Equality Officer because in Year 7 the school shut down the

294   Pride Club and I was like erm okay, and we fought for the rest of that term to

295   get a reason why and it turns out it wasn't inclusive enough. It was too

296   isolationist and so we, obviously I was in Year 7 at this point so I hadn't

297   created it but I was like 'that was the safe place for the entirety of the

298   community, you have the rest of the school for straight kids and cis kids who

299   have a normalised life and don't have to deal with this and you're taking it

300   away from us, what's going on', and every time it was a variation of 'because I

301   can, because its too isolationist' and I said its not an excuse, and they

302   brought it back at the end of the day. Where its like I get it that some people

303   might not feel safe outside of school and its useful to have one at the end of

304   school so that we can talk about stuff and potentially get things reported but

Handwritten notes:

sense of community from rejection

community important

visibility

shut down pride

advocating, fighting

Participant 1

Thoughts as I go through:

-frustration and anger at socially constructed idea of gender in society

-gender is mine, not yours

-how name is perceived is important – it's only important because people hold certain ideas and attributes to female name – when know they don't they can use either female or male name

-interests being more important to identity than gender

-Roller Derby – safe place to explore GI

-impact of safe space (Roller Derby) – stop apologising for being you

-advocacy, speaking up – correcting sixth form

-safe space = save lives

-importance of being able to defend self at school

-society ignoring issues that don't apply to them

-reference to politics – gay marriage, conversion therapy – not for trans

-we need to get loud, and get loud collectively

-internalised stigmas and stereotypes from heteronormative people about how to be – need to reject so no longer oppressed

-erasure and rejection within queer community of black trans woman

-representation important for knowing where fit in

-ignorance of history/culture within queer community

-history of being de-humanised in queer community

-impact of religion on treatment of queer community

-impact of upbringing on attitude towards self and others

-have to be quite hardened – can't have a pity party – need to get up and make sure something doesn't happen again

-defying gender norms. Gender is what we make it (me and friends)

-community of neurodiverse friends

-sense of community from rejection from society

-community feels important – hard to do without it

-visibility – make my voice heard

-pride shut down pride club – had to fight for answers

-importance of safe space (e.g pride club)

-teachers can call things out if they are accepting – not guaranteed

-responsibility on individual

-importance of normalising

-power, white privilege, being in education

-school made pride club at home time instead of lunchtime – harder for kids because picked on at lunch – **no consideration**

-only put pride club in place because of backlash, only put tampons in inclusive toilet because asked to (lack of thought consideration)

-tokenistic pride in school, bare minimum

-impact of no pride club – kid left school

-perpetuate white, cis, straight ideology in classrooms

-importance of inclusive language

-normalising this stuff is new but we are not

-call for school to start doing stuff off their own back – it's tiresome/there's a cost to individuals having to do this

-microaggressions from school

-neurodiversity impacting gender experience

-acceptance – comfort in how dress (family)

-acceptance from friends and family = protective

-acceptance in 3 parts – self, close safety net (peers/family) and society – best can get is 2 out of 3

-social pressure to appease oppressors

-impact of societal rejection (online and in person) = lack of self acceptance

-society has normalised to think certain things (eg being trans)

-school has made it harder to come out

-feel a responsibility to make things better for peers and successors

-anger is fuelling

-being singled out by teachers – looking at you because you're queer – assuming you're an advocate for the queer community

-school should have a role in shaping students political voices – school teaching people to be bystanders and it's the minorities that suffer

-schools being politically neutral is political

-my right to safety is not a political choice. The choices I make regarding my body shouldn't be a political choice

-fuelled to create safe places moving forwards because safe place at school was eradicated

-minority experience – white straight man in power – hypervigilance of social cues/on guard

-unsafe society to be assigned female at birth – hypervigilance

-different protected characteristics are treated differently – sexism and transphobia more subtle

-need school to actually **listen**

-come from unconventional family which seems protective, own family traditions different to norms

-beliefs come more from family upbringing than school

-scotland had a third gender

-witch identity and reclamation of power – burnt at time – scared of women in power – medicine suffered as a result

-have to fight for belonging

-anxiety about getting others pronouns right and not outing them

-guilt for socially transitioning and expectation from others that gender isn't fluid

-a little effort can have a big impact

-if you're in the LGBTQ+ community be loud until they listen, if you're not, just listen

Overall thoughts:

-having to fight/advocate for self and others all the time – exhausting

-responsibility feels a lot on individual rather than school – school haven't considered/thought about how things might impact trans students eg language, pride club, tampons in inclusive toilets, teachers looking to them when discussing something queer, attending school meetings and telling it how it is

-safety - need safety to come out

-they consider power, norms, oppression

-feels rubbish they're having to work so hard – support of school doesn't feel there

-expectation that should be grateful can now hold partners hand?/that school is doing something rather than nothing

-not feeling heard by school – empty promises, tokenistic

-talks about lots of aspects of identity – queer, pagan, witch, family identity, scottish

-supportive teachers are the exceptions

-lack of support at school and experiences of oppression have fuelled ability to have a voice – strength has come from oppression – you can get complacent if you forget where strength came from

-thinks about intersectionality

-pressure to be loud, can't just be

Appendix I

Example of line-by-line coding in NVivo

Appendix J

Table J1

Example of the Process of Constructing Emerging Themes by Grouping, Reorganising and Examining Codes According to Patterns of Shared Meaning in Microsoft Excel

	A	B	C	D	
1	Onus on the student when getting recognised in institutions - labour	strategy in how navigate insitutions - have to adjust	Scrutiny or burden of visibility	Support contingent not structural (inequity)	
2	onus on student to advocate - labour	concerned with external perception	scruitiny and being made to feel the r	Contrast between college and high school culture	er
3	institutional tokenism	comfort linked to location	concerned with external perception	friends protective	yc
4	youth leadership and activism	hypervigilance	unwanted spotlight	peer support important	ac
5	need for institutional responsibility fo	presentation influences how perceived	lack of representation of trans folk in so	value autonomy at college	in
6	get loud to be heard	safety in anonymity	being trans os political	validation in shared experience	vi
7	voices need to be heard	avoidance of certain areas of college	?visibility of trans identity	teachers vary in awareness	re
8	unintentional transphobia or dismissi	familiarity breeds comfort	lack of understanding of gender fluidity or	trans identity	se
9	lack of understanding of gender fluidity c	threat from hypermasculinised environ	political eraure of trans and trans rights	(shifts as an older learner)	sh
10	desire to be listened to by institution a	expression breeds comfort	intrusive questions vs welcome curiosity	role model	
11	cisnormative infrastructure	safety vs authenticity	desire to be treated normally	teacher affirmation	
12	cisnormative language	society a threatening place for trans pe	feeling different	diverse affirming peers	
13	institutions should do better to address	inclusion and non-acceptance	bullied for difference	peer connection through shared experience	
14	limited impact of school awarenss strategies on attitiudes		home and institution disclosure connect	shared identity - friends	

Table J2

Example of the Process of Constructing Emerging Themes by Grouping, Reorganising and Examining Codes According to Patterns of Shared Meaning in Microsoft Excel

	A	D	E	F	G
1	Code name	Cluster	Second cluster	Third cluster	Fourth cluster
2	importance of representation	identity work - becoming through self, others and strucutures			
3	academic or career aspirations	strategising or adjusting while navi	identity work: becoming in relation to self, others and structures		
4	importance of community	community as survival/finding belonging			
5	Contrast between college and high schoo	support contingent not structural			
6	social networks form around shared ident	community as survival/finding belonging			
7	absence of negative experiences seen as p	absence, erasure or institutional neglect			
8	being trans is political	scrutiny or burden of visibility			
9	peer support important	community as survival/finding belc	support contingent not structural		
10	concerned with external perception	scrutiny or burden of visibility	strategising or adjusting while navigating institutions/navigating strategically		
11	i am multifaceted	scrutiny or burden of visibility			
12	friends protective	community as survival/finding belonging			
13	intersecting gender and neurodivergence	identity work - becoming through self, others and strucutures			
14	refuge in safe spaces	community as survival/finding belonging			
15	onus on student to advocate - labour	onus on the student			
16	limited impact of school awareness strate	onus on the student	absence, erasure and institutional neglect		
17	diverse affirming peers	community as survival/finding belc	support contingent not structural		
18	role model	support contingent not structural	community as survival/resistance - finding belonging outside the system		
19	teacher affirmation	support contingent not structural			

2 Clusterings and coding   support contingent   onus on the student   Strategising w ...

Appendix K

Example of the Process of Reviewing and Refining Emerging Themes Through an Iterative Process of Moving Between the Coded Extracts and Full Transcripts
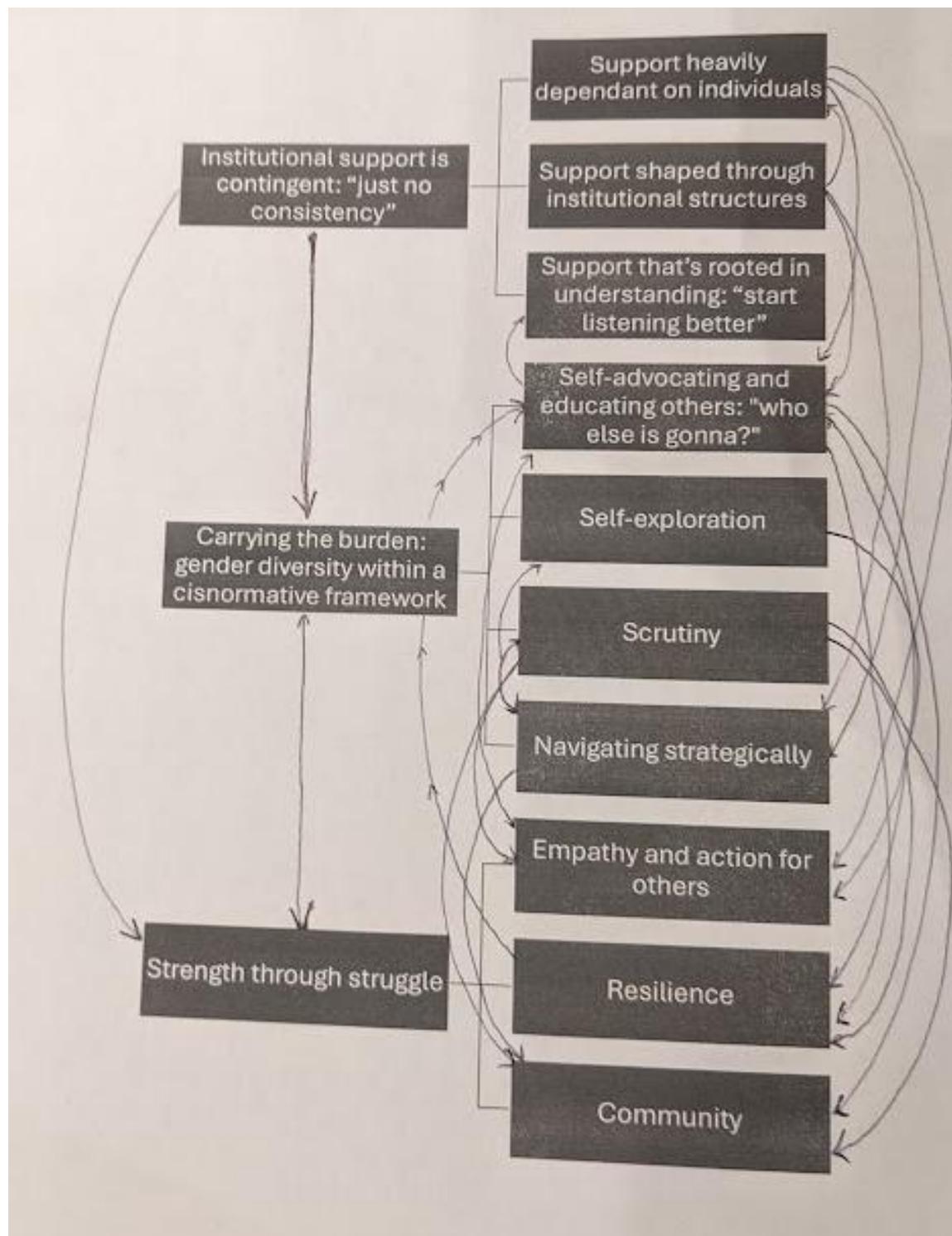
	A	B	C	D
1	Code name	Description	Sub theme	Links to other codes or
2	acknowledgement of cultural and familial socialisation	Male-dominated, often hostile environment in the construction centre, where a female student faced bullying for her perceived sexuality, leading her to leave. The participant highlights that such attitudes stem from broader cultural and familial socialisation, noting the challenges of addressing misogyny and homophobia within college. Attempts to raise awareness through college structures like PPD and feminist societies are either ineffective or inconsistent, with some sessions being irrelevant and leadership unsupportive.	lack of embedding in support structures	
3	administration process positive	Instances where administrative processes like enrolment forms, registers, and ID systems successfully accommodated trans students' names and identities. Participants described feeling affirmed when preferred names were used on lanyards, registers were updated quickly, or staff offered to input changes themselves. These positive experiences eased anxiety and reduced the emotional burden of coming out repeatedly. However, the fact that these examples are notable and sometimes dependent on specific staff members or institutions highlights their contingency. They are not guaranteed or uniformly implemented, reinforcing that support remains dependent on individuals or local practices, rather than embedded in consistent structural policy.	lack of embedding in support structures	
4	affirming coming out experience to friend	The participant describes coming out as trans to their best friend, who grew up in a conservative environment and had his own experiences with sexuality. Despite initial nervousness, the friend responded with immediate acceptance, viewing the participant as a brother and becoming a strong supporter, defending them in school and affirming their name and pronouns.	support dependant on individuals	
5	affirming teacher is rare	The participant reflects on how, out of approximately ten teachers, only one or two were respectful and affirming when they changed their name multiple times during lower school. The majority either invalidated the name choices or responded with visible discomfort or dismissal, making the supportive teachers stand out as unusual exceptions.	support dependant on individuals	
	anxiety re teachers uniting in transphobia	The participant recounts a deeply distressing experience with a maths teacher who persistently refused to use their correct name and pronouns despite repeated corrections and meetings. This caused significant emotional upset, leading to crying and anxiety about attending college. The participant's mother intervened , resulting in the teacher reluctantly complying, but the participant still felt the situation was awkward and unresolved. The participant also expresses anxiety about the possibility of other teachers taking similar attitude, creating pervasive fear of transphobia among staff. This		

‹ › •••   2 Clusterings and coding   **support contingent**   onus on the student   Strategising w ••• + ⋮

Edit   Accessibility: Investigate

Appendix L

Thematic Map to Visualise Relationships Between Subthemes

Appendix M

Description of Themes Alongside Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Subtheme	Example quotes	P
Institutional support is contingent: "just no consistency" **Essence:** Support for gender diverse youth within educational institutions is not guaranteed. It is often inconsistent, both within and across institutions, and is not consistently embedded into institutional structures and policies. Support is often dependent on individuals (staff and parents) and the context of the institution (e.g., institution type, size). Gender diverse youth identify understanding as a key driver for future improvement.	Support heavily dependent on individuals	***Teachers/staff:*** "I think ==teachers can do things==, I've had teachers with ==Pride stickers== to ==show support== on like their laptops and stuff or teachers ==asking you about pronouns== and ==preferred names== and nick names and stuff like that. I mean ==that's helpful== but I think ==as an institution college itself doesn't actually do anything== actually" (P04) "I think it again really ==depends on the teacher==, like obviously ==age is a big thing== but I had a lot of my ==older teachers just don't understand== when I try to explain to them and it's just ==not having that being educated== on this kind of thing or having the right understanding which is a big problem cos you'll explain it to them and they'll ==use the right name not always pronouns== but I've just come to a point where I realise ==they won't always fully get it== or understand." (P06) "it ties into the ==struggle of me coming out to the rest of my teachers== because in the past, like in lower school I changed my name a fair bit because I couldn't find the right one, and I had such and so saying "oh that name doesn't quite suit you" or (SIGH) just like the sigh and eyeroll, okay, fine. I think I had ==one teacher== who was good with it and he was like ==really good,== he was like "chill, if I mess it up I'm really sorry, I'm English, I'm gonna be bad at it". He never messed it up once, it was like ==he was the only one==. So it's like the fact that ==I had at least ten teachers and him and probably one other teacher were the only ones who could do it==, says a lot about what needs to be fixed in this school" (P01) ***Parents:*** "It's just ==lack of education in schools== about how to deal with having a trans student because how they approached me and how they approached a trans man who's a year above me, totally different. And it's all ==based on parental backing==. Yeah, rather than what the individual young person needs." (P07) "I had this old math teacher last year who, she just refused to use the right name or pronouns, like she knew and all my friends in class corrected her, I corrected her and I had so many meetings with her and other teachers trying to explain and other teachers trying to explain and she just refused. So to the point I came home one day ,and I was just crying, I was so upset because I was like you have to listen to this every day at college, I can't do this every day, but I finally just told my mom and my mom lost her mind....so she had a big	P01 P03 P04 P05 P06 P07 P11 P12

argument with my math teacher, and she used the correct name of pronouns after that but it always was a bit awkward when I did come into her class cos I know the only reason she used like the correct name of pronouns is because of the conversation with my mom and how mad mom was about it, and so when it could have all been resolved if that teacher listened, we could have just had a normal calm conversation.....Yeah, it just kind of didn't make me not want to go to college or her lessons and it made me just really, cos even though it was one teacher made me really nervous around other teachers, of course all these teachers talk, what if she convinces them somehow to do the same in the end and won't be able to ever escape this constant loop of having to have a conversation of teachers...one ne.. negative experience being repeated over and over again like that can change so much." (P06)

Support shaped through institutional structures	***Processes regarding name changes:*** "It's not all been smooth sailing at [Northern University] because I've got a known as name and you'd have think they've never done that before, but I know that a load of the Asian students, they also have a known as name. But it's like my email addresses don't come through as my right name all the time. I do have to explain it to seminarists which does put me in a little bit of an uncomfortable situation. I don't want to have to explain my identity every time I need to email a new person at the uni. But it's so much better than what I thought I'd be having to deal with. (P07)

"I know I mentioned talking about my experiences in college but if I could briefly talk about them in high school cos that's when I officially came out.....Erm when I wanted to get my name changed on the register they said that I had to come out to my parents first to do it just so there wouldn't be any confusion at parents evenings but it was terrifying, you know and the fact that I had to do that just so they could change my name on the register even if, if I had done it and I was in an unsafe environment then that would have been incredibly risky, you know.....It made me feel quite a distrust for kind of not school but kind of just the I suppose education system" (P05)

"Of course, I haven't gotten my name legally changed yet, so on the form, it's put my dead name, but there is an option to put your preferred name, in it is printed on your lanyard and it does get sent to teachers which really got rid of loads of anxiety of having to have the awkward hey I know on the register it says this name to go by NAME – (Participant), even though it's two very different names is can you use NAME – (Participant) and not having to worry about teachers not letting it happen. I think the only teacher who will know my dead name is the head of my course, but he organises, he does all the assignment marks and all the exam marks so I don't have to worry about when I write an exam and having to write my dead name on it having to explain it to a

teacher because it just all goes through him and he already knows." (P06)

Structural oversight:
"I think college in terms of organisation wise could be a little bit more understanding, specifically with the things like the ==toilets== because there was never anything said about it, like I didn't, like I wasn't confident enough to ask about it until after 2 months of being at college because I didn't know where I was supposed to go to the bathroom because there was ==no like sign for a gender neutral bathroom==, and there was only one and it was ==hidden== round a corner of an office, and then they have accessible toilets, which I was told I was supposed to use, but there's ==only three in the whole building==, and when you've got like five floors and hundreds and hundreds of classrooms and like however many thousand students there is, it would be better if they had a little bit more." (P12)

"Yeah, better use of the [Northern University] LGBT Societies, having something where ==they spotlight the inclusive wellbeing service==. Is, that where it's going directly to the user base like that would be helpful. But yeah, so it's [Northern University]'s inclusive wellbeing people, they're amazing and the trans support fund. That has been a lifesaver for me.... but ==it's not advertised==. So yeah, I found that by searching Trans [Northern University] to see if there was a way that I could change my name on the ID and it just popped up randomly. It's not embedded properly onto the [Northern University] website. It's if you find it, you find it or if you go to the student union and you happen to talk to the wellbeing person who runs it, then you find out about it. But ==that's chance==." (P07)

Institution type, size, uniform, gender splits, course, cohort/culture:
"coming to college was honestly like the absolute best for me and it was such a relief and I think the teachers or my tutors on my course are like honestly like ==the loveliest==, they, I have never had a problem at college with my gender identity and in fact because I am an art student I am doing a project right now and I'm sort of doing it on identity and like actually some of my teachers are my ==biggest allies== as well (LAUGH), erm and yeah ==so supportive== and I mean the students as well, I think it definitely helps because it is an ==art course so everyone there is a bit alternative, there's like tonnes of gay people== (LAUGH) so I think it would definitely be ==different if I was taking like, I dunno, erm bricklaying==" (P11)

"I just think just ==cos it's a big college== and there's ==more people like me== there and like there is more because there's quite a bit of erm, like there's a ==clear diversity in dress sense== and stuff, you know you can see that people are allowed to be themselves and dress how they want to be and I think that ==makes other people more==

like comfy. Sort of like a spiral, once a couple of people start dressing that way people say it's more comfortable that they can and then they affect other people. I think it's more like a community thing. I don't know how much college as an institution influence however its just students at the age is of around 16 to 19 that cos you sort of come into yourself at that age, I don't know if its more the students or the college itself." (P04) (emotional support)

"obviously at college, you've got so much more room to express yourself. You can, I don't think we have a dress code, I don't think we have a dress code at all in my college (LAUGH). it's just like don't show up naked. So there's definitely like you have such huge parameter to express yourself and like but the tutors are there to support you but they're not going to tell you what to do, it's not like a you must do this, you must do that like it was in secondary school, so definitely there's just so much more freedom which I think lets you sort of open up to who you actually are." (P11)

"I feel like at college I've had more opportunities to be a bit more authentic, things are less split into boys and girls at college. Like I mean, the one issue I'd say with college gender-wise is that they don't have a gender-neutral bathroom. they did and then in September of last year they locked it, so it's a little bit harder in that respect, but in terms of socially, college is much easier because there is any divide between any kind of gender, it's just everybody's treated the same." (P12)

Institutional efforts with little positive effect
"we have these tv screens around college as well, this is, these only display the slides for a couple of seconds at a time, when I was trying to find, I saw your research pop up a couple of times but I never actually managed to read it because it would pop up for like 30 seconds and then move on so I'm like, I don't think that its cool and I think it does have awareness of some issues but I think maybe it doesn't actually help that much because people aren't always reading them and all the slides are only on for like 30 seconds at a time. I think maybe in class would be a better thing because people are more likely to attend the actual lessons and to be there rather than being a tutorial, I think that probably would work better than just a tutorial that people don't actually go to." (P04)

"I think it's just there isn't a consensus. Uni knows that things in the media and the wider world at the minute are scary and so they do try to be positive but sometimes they try too far and it ends up being a little bit tokenistic and that has the opposite effect to what they want and it's like they mean well and it's lovely but yeah I'm someone who's sat in the lecture I'm not some theoretical concept. Yeah, I want it to be normal, I

don't want it to be a special extra bit. It's just the cards I was dealt." (P07)

"There's just like so many different posters everywhere about like support groups and clubs, you know its.., there's a lot of opportunities to find people like you and to talk about some problems that may occur really." (P05) – ==exception==

Feeling that there's not much more the institution can do:
"there's not much the uni can really I don't think. It's just the cohort of people I've ended up with. The uni try their best to do diversity modules, but they're optional. it's like a page on the canvas. It's not something that's embedded into the induction really, things like that. So it does feel like a lot of the responsibility for dealing with trans optics is on me and the other trans people on the course." (P07)

Support that's rooted in understanding: "start listening better"

"Yeah I think probably I'm just yeah, probably just like ==people in admin listening to the students== because we have a student union, my friend is the ==president of the student union== and they ==don't get much past the head==, there was a whole situation and he is a new head and erm changed a lot of how college is run and its not going great at the moment, especially for the students and the subject teachers and I think that if he had maybe ==asked or listened== to what the students are saying then it wouldn't have been as much as a car crash as it has been so I think it's more, a more structurally things that could be better." (P03)

"I think secondary school ==needs a lot more resources== and to support gender diverse people because I mean personally I didn't have a lot of trouble but I know other gender diverse people who did in secondary school, but I don't know whether that's maybe a ==personal attitude thing== ==rather than a institutional thing== but I think ==making teachers aware== of potential things that can be, that gender people and gender diverse people can be vulnerable to could be important because I think we do a little bit of this in sociology where verbal, like verbal comments and ==verbal abuse== by students can often go ==ignored by staff== because they don't think its that big of an issue" (P04)

"it's great having the mental health support team, and the wellbeing team there, but if just teachers just had the basic understanding of how like their actions can affect people, it would be a lot easier instead of like constantly having to go to someone else or go to them to explain." (onus on student to advocate – labour, P06)

"==Some staff members are very much well educated==, understanding, but ==a lot just typically don't really bother, purely because it doesn't really affect them==, whereas I feel like a lot of teachers==, if they understood more, they==

could act on more, which is good when students can have those conversations and have those meetings because it's not really anyone's fault, it's just something where a few conversations could make a big difference." (P12)

Carrying the burden: gender diversity within a cisnormative framework	Self-advocating and educating others: "who else is gonna?"	P01

Gender diverse youth often take on unacknowledged labour, which has an emotional toll. Young people feel responsible for advocating for themselves and educating others, while exploring their own gender identity and managing the scrutiny that comes with this. Considerable effort is directed towards navigating educational institutions strategically in order to keep themselves safe and protected.

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P12

Correcting/explaining/repeating:

"like I had to correct in sixth form I think twice now about gendered language, it's like it's not, cos there was an open thing on about Uni's or something and its like you're erm son/daughter....there's just a repeating motif of me being like "you need to do this", and then they do it. It's like you shouldn't have to be told by a sixth former who has been going here since Year 7 what to do...., start doing it without our help because we cant always, it gets tiresome" (P01)

"I feel like I'm always having to like explain myself to people, whether its just to correct them on their pronouns or because they don't know what it is, erm or they're not familiar with it, so that's been a challenge..... it's just awkward and it's like you don't wanna keep having the same conversations over and over again. Like I wish I could just say "oh Google it", but I feel kind of obliged to educate people about it because who else is gonna, like if non-binary people are not the ones speaking out about it and saying like educating people about it, it feels like who else is gonna." (P02)

"I think it just sometimes makes me a bit more nervous and tell people I'm trans, cos now I've been at college for a couple of months now of this course, all my teachers know but thinking about when I go to the higher level next year I'll be different teachers mainly, I wont have one teacher that know, so having to have the whole conversation again , like its just a bit stressful because I'm not always 100% sure how they react, like how cos sometimes I can do it myself where I go and explain and they chill and fine but sometimes if they don't understand or they're a bit transphobic it gets to the point where I have to involve my parents, get them to explain it to them for me or involve other people at college which can be just really overwhelming and stressful" (P06)

Being an expert:

"It's just a completely different position to my cis peers and having to be an expert in how the administrative process works and things like that. yeah.... it's an added stressor. I had to navigate disability accommodations for one of my exams last term... but my name was going to be my old name on it, then that wouldn't connect to the systems properly and that's just an unnecessary stressor on what's already like it's 75% of my grade. It should be that I'm worried about the revision not trying to get the exam team on side and yeah but it was like I

was the first person to have ever asked that question. One of my friends, she's a Chinese student and her name on the prof.. on the profiles known as is [NAME] and they're fine with her. She's never had any bother and I'm not sure how it's so different for trans students." (P07)

Representing trans folk:
"it does feel like I'm having to be community ambassador is how I'd put it. So there's an added stress of I can't do anything wrong. I can't be upset if they use the wrong name and things like that. And that's a pressure. But it feels important to me that I do give people a good impression of how trans people can be cos I know that the media is shocking at that and I just want people to be normal about it. Yeah, and making those connections with people at different sporting societies and things. It's like yes, I'm trans, but I'm also an elite karate person. So yeah, having that come first has been really helpful in just getting people at the uni to be normal about it." (P07)

Normalising:
"I also did a thing in the library where I created pride bookmarks of black lives matters, women's rights and as an umbrella term, and the progress pride as an umbrella terms as well, and I worked with the odd librarian to make them smaller so that they can be slotted in the book because we didn't want to say 'here's the LGBTQ corner', because that's not normalising, that's just further showing that you're different, but when everyone comes in they are asking "where are the gay books, where are the queer books", its like okay we need to figure a way out so people that people can go "there". So we created the bookmark system where there is a little flag at the top of the books where they can go and find the flags. There is a sign at the entrance; Find the Flags. You keep the flags in there and most of them have discreet covers now erm but its small enough so that you can keep your page with that bookmark so it doesn't get lost, also if you're not out to your family, they're not gonna see the flag....that's all I've managed to do so far and it's a start from the school only doing the bare minimum but in my eyes its not enough, school needs to be aware that what they're doing much better than others is still a bare minimum of respect" (P01)

Using my voice/standing up for myself:
"lots of people tend to say protect but I think support and uplift is more important than protect, I think especially for me which does sort of link more to education, I didn't feel like I wanted to be protected, I wanted to support myself and uplift myself and make sure that people were seen and that I was respected, I wanted to do it myself rather just be overly protective over people, I think its important that people learn to look after others but also themselves sort of.....Yeah, it could mean people are hidden by other people. I think this is a

thing with a lot of movements though its, I think I saw it a lot in the Black Lives Matter where it was like you want to, you don't want white people speaking on behalf of black people, you want black voices to be heard in the same way I want trans voices to be heard, I don't want like people trying to protect them cos I think that sometimes can have, unfortunately it can affect them hiding away instead of just being heard." (P04)

"I mean it has shown me like how important it is to stand up for yourself, not just yourself but also other people around you because again when I first came out, and a year or two after coming out as I said I didn't really stand up for myself much or other people around me and it did affect my mental health and people around me mental health" (P06)

Locating my own support for wellbeing:
"Yeah or really being any minority in general, yeah there doesn't feel as if there's a whole lot of guidance, and maybe that's just cos I haven't sought it out in the right places. That's not to say it doesn't exist, but it can be hard to know where to look, you know especially with online spheres being such a risk I suppose, I don't want to be absorbing the wrong ideas especially with like the rise of right wingism so to speak. There's a lot of people who rather I didn't identify this way at all and I don't want to be absorbing that idea any more than I already have." (P09)

"I did need some level of counselling, but I was worried about if I went through the uni's counselling service, I'd then have to explain my identity to a random older man. But I wasn't put in that position. The inclusive counselling team tries to match you with someone who's as close to your lived experience as they can get. So I was put with a lovely older trans man who was fantastic and that was just so helpful.....It's think [Northern University] advertise the night line a lot as the main wellbeing avenue and they advertise law student specific well-being but they don't advertise the inclusive being team quite as heavy-handedly, but I know there are queer people on my course who would appreciate help like that.... just because it's a smaller minority of people doesn't mean that it shouldn't be advertised at all really. The onus is now on us to be able to find these resources and that's just another stressor." (P07)

Self-exploration	"gender fluid has taken me a while to find out, its taken me seven bloody years, but I've got there, and this feels the most right I've felt in a while so I shouldn't be feeling this guilt with wanting to socially transition.....I've got lot of internalised transphobias, I've worked through all those seven years and got to where I am now" (P01)

"Yeah it's like I'm slowly trying to build myself back up, you know, like imagine if you got your memory wiped, like and then slowly overtime your building back up to try and find out who you were, it's kind of like that really, you know I'm trying new things, I'm trying to kind of figure out what makes me feel more like me, you know…Yeah, well I'm quite happy with myself right now actually. It's taken a long time for me to try and figure out kind of what I want or how I want to look but I really feel like I've kind of gotten comfortable with myself, you know." (P05)

"I've spoken about this with my trans friends and I feel like a lot of people wanna say that erm you know trans people just shove it in other people's faces and its not all there is to you but actually, you know when we discuss it, like you cant just be trans and have it not effect you which is why it is definitely such a big part of my identity but then obviously like I said friends, family members, like try and push this kind of erm I think, I think it was something my aunt said to me, I think it was like 'you're more than your gender', like 'you're more than your gender identity', and it's like yeah of course but that doesn't mean it hasn't impacted me in my life because it definitely has, to then sort of makes me feel like I wanna forget about being trans and you know just push it to the background and remember everything about me like you know I'm an artist, I'm drummer, I love music and all of that kind of thing." (P11)

Scrutiny

Being reduced down to my gender:
"the main problems would be those implicit biases, things being directed to you in a way where people aren't trying to be offensive and they're trying to be really accepting, but it's kind of just a bit uncomfortable…So yeah I'll talk on like tutors and stuff like I could be doing a presentation someone could be like "why does that affect you directly", and it's the tone in which you say that, and also in my one-to-one sessions I have with my head tutor, like the head of my course, she will often focus on me being trans and thats an issue when it might be like, "I'm experiencing at home at the minute or I'm just struggling at the minute for other reasons" And it will always come back to, "how are you feeling about being trans"" (P10)

Being made to feel different:
"its tough erm because (SIGH) it [being trans] just makes you feel so different from everyone else and yeah being different is good, you know no one should be the same but it makes you feel like you're not a person, more like (SIGH) it makes you feel kind of like you're an alien which it sounds strange but it just makes you feel so different from everyone else, you know …. its people's reactions to it, I mean depending on how they react it can mean like a hundred different things but its when people prod about it that makes you really feel like you're a test object or like a zoo animal being poked you know, it's the intrusive questions and the odd sense

of kind of <mark>strangeness</mark> about it" (P05)

Carrying burden from outside educational institutions:
"looking at any sort of, erm any sort of media story to do with trans people and if.. it's not like 'oh this is a trans actor look what they did', its like a, even if it's like talking about trans accomplishments, its ah, if you look at the comments, there's maybe few that are like 'ah this person is cool, that's great', bizarre, but then a lot more of them are like a 'oh this is just a diversity ploy, they are gonna infect our children with their transgenderness'. We can't have that." (P08)

"online seeing everything that goes on in America as well is quite hard. So politically I'd say there physically is the barrier of hormone blockers being banned in the UK for younger trans people which is going to have a big effect on getting to that joy and finding themselves in their identity, so I kind of thought about that, but also it's kind of the way that trans people are spoken about it kind of always becomes political even though it shouldn't be as well. So I kind of think about the way that this misinformation in particular is spread, so a lot of it is about trans women being in sports and the way that trans women in particular are treated and that barrier being put up because they want to try and control people's bodies at the end of the day, but I think also politically in the sense that people always want control. They want to put the barriers there because they don't like the idea of change and progression because it points them out as a negative leader or a negative party if we're talking in the UK as well. Yeah, I think it's hard because there's so much politically that you could go down the route of, but I just thinking about that negative response that comes from politics, that was definitely the idea of the barriers for me, and then when you're looking over that, you can find the joy in chosen family and in choosing your identity. Not choosing, but like figuring out the label that fits you the most or figuring out how you feel and just living as yourself, away from that." (P10)

Concern with others' perceptions:
you are judging yourself and constantly <mark>worrying about being perceived</mark> by people and how you're being perceived by people" (P10)

"I'd say that sometimes because <mark>it can be hard to be perceived the way that I want</mark> to be when I'm not acting in a specific way. Sometimes I remember for Pride I was wearing like eyeliner and a crop top when I got mis-gendered a bit more generally at that time, which then made me feel a little bit worse. That's kind of the challenge of when I express myself in a little bit more of a feminine way, I tend to get more bothered when I get misgendered, whereas typically it doesn't bother me very much....I think it impacts me less because I know

that I'm not really doing anything to like cause, whereas if I'm dressed really feminine and I get misgendered more, it kind of makes me feel like, is it because of how I'm acting or is it because of how I'm dressing or is it just generally happening. (P12)

Navigating strategically

Visibility/invisibility:
"then on days where maybe we don't want to be, so obviously I will dress a little bit more low key so its very flexible to how I'm feeling, for example if I'm feeling quite a little bit more insecure and dysphoric I probably won't dress as out there with the transgender thing on my back cos I want to go more low key" (P04)

"especially when it comes to decision making, like do I be visibly queer or not, do I fight myself and my people or not, and another thing about my autism funnily enough, is that a really common trait is a strong sense of justice and feeling as if I'm doing nothing is like slowly eating me up inside." (P09)

Finding places of safety/avoiding unsafe spaces:
"there were definitely some safe spaces around my school, like me and my trans friends would hang out in the music department and our music teacher was like an old lesbian and she was so lovely and she was one of those people you could just go to about any sort of problems." (P11)

"Erm we had a sports day and I managed to sort of slither my way out of PE because my mum worked with me to say 'alright we'll let your secondary school know you do exercise at home so you don't have to deal with the gendered spaces of PE'" (P04)

"I don't really feel like at college I was going to get harassed unless maybe I went, a lot of people have this thing about like the construction centre cos those are sort of more typical males that you'd see in secondary school or maybe a little less considerate than other students, so that's the only place that I've ever really felt a little bit uncomfortable" (P04)

"I think the only like big like issue I do struggle with college is like the bathroom situation cos there are gender neutral bathrooms but not in every building.....I normally go to is the music building cos I have friends in there and the gender neutral bathrooms in there are quite good. Teachers will see me like wandering around the building and go "you're not a student, what are you doing here" and having to go, "I'm just using the bathroom". You're a public service student". "you can use the bathrooms there", no I can't really, just like I think more public spaces and more colleges should be more aware of that and have gender neutral bathrooms

and buildings, yeah." (P06)

"It kind of caused lots of anxiety cos now I'll be walking through the gender neutral bathrooms and I'm like as I'm walking I'm trying to, come up in my head of if I get asked a questions, what am I going to say, like normally some teachers are pretty chilled, Im like "I'm more comfortable in these bathrooms!, and they're like "oh okay", and then they'll be the odd teacher who goes "no but you have to use the bathrooms in your building on class time", and like normally I'm just "ah Im trans and there's no gender neutral bathrooms in that building, I don't feel comfortable using those", and just explain myself a bit more, which sometimes I don't mind but also sometimes it's just a bit exhausting constantly explaining myself just the simplest thing." (P06)

Hypervigilance:
"Its being aware of social cues because erm its knowing when its safe to come out because there have been times when I've misread social cues....and it's been like you could feel the tone shift instantly." (P01)

Strength through struggle **Essence:** This theme captures the dynamic relationship between hardship and strength. Gender diverse youth endure and transform adversity into sources of power and agency, by advocating for others and cultivating resilience and community.	Empathy and action for others	**P01** **P02** **P03** **P04** **P05** **P06** **P07** **P08** **P10**

Providing safe space for others:
"I think creating safe spaces has definitely been a big part with like with the need to create a Roller Derby club in Uni's, I am heavily assuming came from the fact that my safe space was irradicated from me as soon as I got into the school, I think we had about a term of it and then it was gone and it was like "whoa, Christ on a bike". So that need to build safe spaces and a need for everyone to actually be equal has impacted it heavily" (empathy and advocacy, P01)

Visibility to help others:
"I see myself as someone who keeps like I keep going as much as I can, I try to be as resilient as I can and I try to be seen and I try to be visible and I just try to visibly like keep going and stuff like that." (P04) (coping strategy)

"I'm aware that having representation is really important otherwise you're gonna live for a lot of your life being 'I don't know where I go', and it was like one of those things where boys you go over there, girls you go over there. Hmm I needed something to show who I was and these people [trans women at stonewall] started a trail reign in order to get there....so in my head its like I just need to be brave and come out to these people because if I do it means that someone else maybe have a look at me socially transitioning safely and be like "oh I can do that as well"" (importance of representation; visibility helps others, P01)

Using my voice to stand up for my community:
"Yeah so by like having people kind of bully me for my gender identity, it's made it much more important for me to be there for other people who are struggling, like younger people who are questioning or just people who don't feel safe to come out and stuff like that. I've felt like I've wanted to be kind of an advocate for people who are struggling, because I'm so sure of myself and I'm in a space where I can be sure of myself and be loud about it, lots of people aren't, so I want to be helpful for them." (P02)*

Resilience

"I think its understanding that that strength has arrived because a lot of people are unwilling to acknowledge that that strength is there, erm because it comes from a place of trauma, from hurt, from pain against you, it's just claiming that, being like you did that to me, you've made me more powerful, now you're gonna have to live with those consequences of making our community angry, making minority communities angry, that's on you, you don't get to complain while were angry now. So its yeah, its erm reclaiming it but also understanding that that strength has come with oppression" (P01)

"I've been out for four years, I'm kind of used to like people having, not having understanding or been having when I come out to new people been there being a bit of a backlash" (P06)

"Yeah. I think resilient is probably, how I'm going to go with that. I've had to go through a lot to be able to live as openly as I do, even though I am not fully out there yet, and I've gone through that. I didn't detransition at any point. I currently don't have access to hormones, but I'm still living as a trans man, and that's fine. It's, yeah." (P07)

Community

Born from hardship:
"Do you feel schools influenced your sense of belonging? P: Erm in a sense that I have had to fight for my own, yes." (P01)

"social adaptation, just living with potentially being neurodiverse as well because a lot of us aren't actually diagnosed, its just quite obvious, erm so its like its showing that we've got this sense of community but it's born out of the fact that the out, the outlining society doesn't accept us and will possibly never accept us if they don't buck up their act (LAUGH). Erm so sort of that its our reclaiming of some control we can have over our lives and our identities knowing that its going to be hard for us to keep that up if we've not got each other there." (P01)

"Well kind of I guess the only thing I haven't really touched on is like political identity as well. I think that sometimes you can feel like you're on a path and everything's just going badly. because there's so much misinformation being spread about you. you feel like your voice isn't being heard and those walls are up because you've got people in power putting those walls up and I think labelling you as certain things, but if you look at the bigger picture, so over the wall, you kind of see that there is a community around you, and even though it might be hard, there is still light within the kind of darkness that's in the image as well." (P10)

Strength through peer connection:
"I think being trans is quite political, I mean being out especially is quite a political thing and actually weirdly the politics classroom is a very safe place for me because I've got a lot of friends." (P03)

"I don't think college has had much of an impact on my gender or anything. It's like maybe affirmed it a bit more just being around because most of my friends, like binary, trans, something or other they're in some way have some gender shenanigans going on. So it's kind of like kind of affirmed things a bit more, but college itself hasn't had any sort of impact on my gender and stuff, it's just been like away we go." (P08)

"we have a friend group who we can create terms with to reclaim that control" (P01)

"I've had quite a hard time in secondary school but erm like I've said having a supportive family and a supportive friends circle, that's been really helpful. So my mental health's good now" (P02)

"I would say the main benefit from school is the friends that I've made because they've helped me discover who I am like and feel sure in my identity, like they were the first people I asked to start calling me NAME – (Participant), to start using they/them pronouns and I think without having such a strong secure friend group it wouldn't have been as easy for me." (P02)

"I've got a nice group of friends who accept me, you know, erm and then some of them can relate to me as well which is quite nice erm. But also being at college does also help me feel like I'm not kind of like the only one" (P05)

Appendix N

Extracts from Reflective diary

During initial conceptualisation of the study:

"I feel like a bit of an imposter pursuing research within the gender diversity field. I worry that I am not the right person to be doing this research being cisgender and that young people are already burdened with the socio-political climate, that it might not feel safe enough to take part in the research and talk about their experiences. Speaking to gender diverse people as well as professionals in the field is taking the edge off these concerns (although they are very much still present!). The feedback I'm getting is that because it is such a difficult time for young people, this it is important to hear their voices and that my initial ideas are promising. Also, that yes gender diverse people leading research is really important but that doesn't mean I shouldn't do this piece of research. It feels good to have feedback from the gender diverse community, I just wish I could get more feedback, but it's proving difficult to secure engagement with charities – I understand why they might be cautious to talk to researchers at the minute. I think it'll be important to hold in mind my gender identity and cisgender privilege, but not assume how that might be received by participants. I feel strongly that I want to do justice to this piece of work."

During the interviews:

"I feel really struck by how resilient, confident and articulate participants are. They are discussing and considering complexities that I don't feel like I started getting to grips with until I was much older. I wonder if they have been forced to mature in ways because they are drawn into positions where they have to confront things that I took for granted? I never had to worry about which toilet I could use…. The list of things

they have to navigate on a daily basis just goes on – there is just so much strength in these young people and the fact that they are so empathic and tuned in to others experiences despite having such a hard time. They have to work so hard to protect themselves all the time, I wonder if they're still in protection mode in these interviews? I feel a strong responsibility to facilitate safety in the interview but it would be understandable if they still felt on edge despite my efforts. The fact that they came forwards to take part feels very courageous. I'll keep an eye on this and make sure I'm asking questions gently, tentatively and sensitively and staying aware of dynamics in the room."
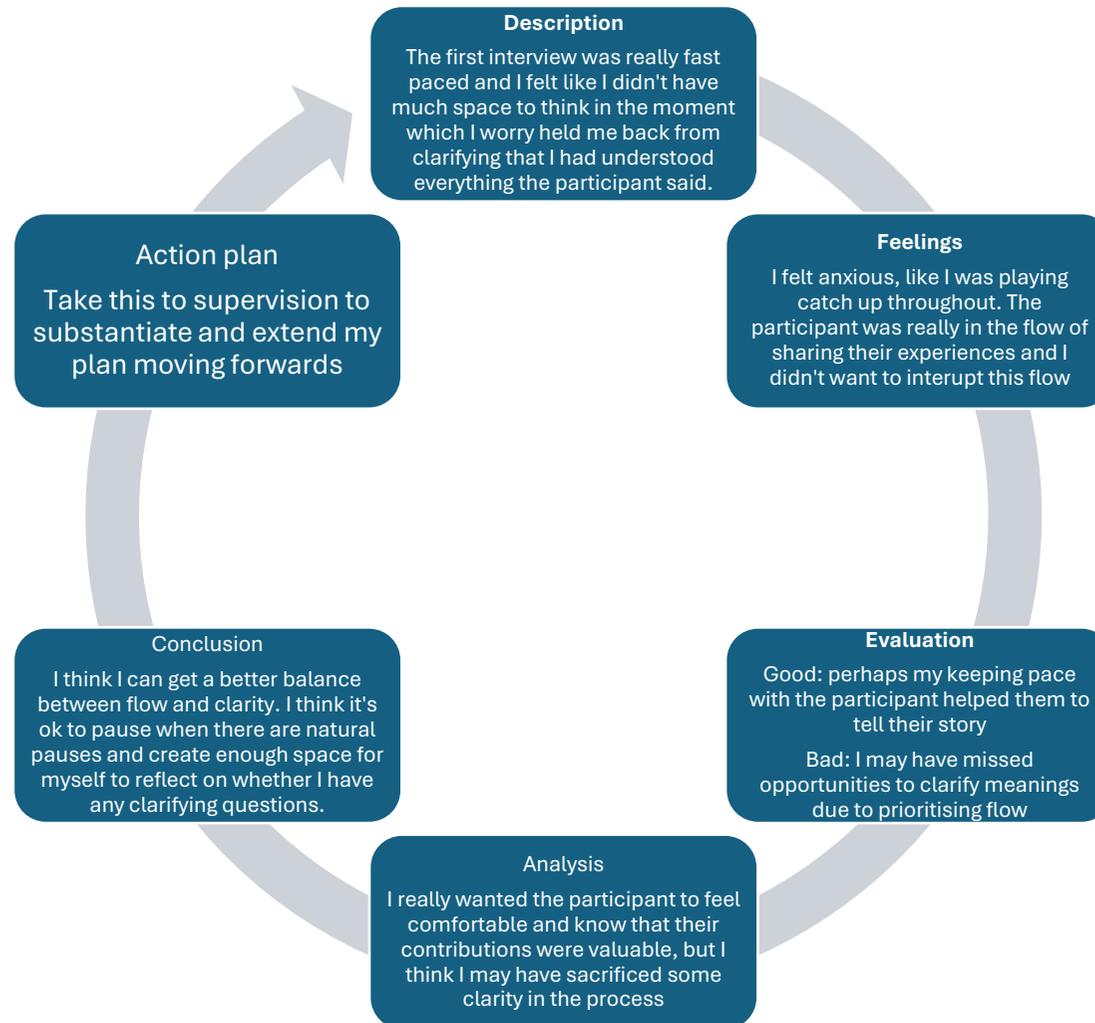
During analysis and write up:

"I've become aware that as I'm processing the data, I have a tendency to be drawn to and focus on the challenges and hardship that gender diverse youth endure. I wonder if this, at least in part, comes from the shock that gender diverse youth are holding so much, in a way that I don't think I had truly appreciated before. I think I'm quite shocked at how pervasive the impact is of their gender diversity and how much they have to cope with, even when they're saying they don't want their gender identity to be a focus for other people – there is so much more to them than their gender identity, yet other people often bring it back to this. This sounds so exhausting and such a heavy weight to bear at a time in life that is so complex and challenging anyway. It's been helpful to reflect on this tendency in supervision and make sure I'm not just focussing on one aspect of people's experiences. There are positive experiences too which need to be reflected in the data, and of course the strength and resilience of young people too."

"I'm noticing that there is a real tension between the word count I have for this write up and wanting to do justice to the voices of the courageous and resilient young people who took part in this study. I'm finding myself writing a really long results section. It was really helpful to discuss this in supervision and reflect on the fact that although it's difficult to let go and accept that there are restrictions on what I can include, it shows how committed I am to the research process and keeping the voices of the participants at the heart of the analysis. It helped to acknowledge that there will always be more to say, and that I have done as thorough job as I can to attend to participants' meanings and reflect them in my write up".

Appendix O

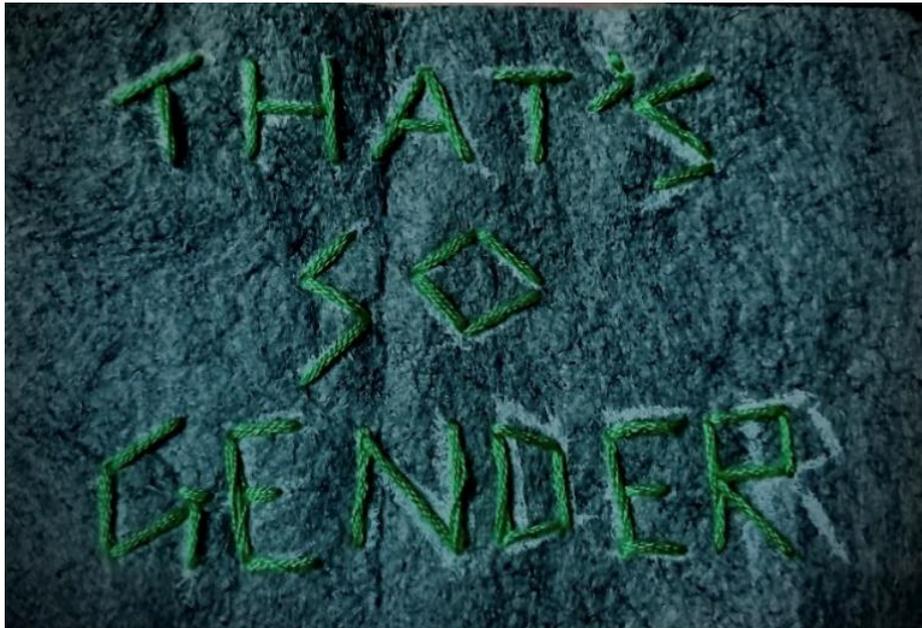*Example of Gibbs' (1998) reflective model 'learning by doing'*

Description
The first interview was really fast paced and I felt like I didn't have much space to think in the moment which I worry held me back from clarifying that I had understood everything the participant said.

Feelings
I felt anxious, like I was playing catch up throughout. The participant was really in the flow of sharing their experiences and I didn't want to interupt this flow

Evaluation
Good: perhaps my keeping pace with the participant helped them to tell their story

Bad: I may have missed opportunities to clarify meanings due to prioritising flow

Analysis
I really wanted the participant to feel comfortable and know that their contributions were valuable, but I think I may have sacrificed some clarity in the process

Conclusion
I think I can get a better balance between flow and clarity. I think it's ok to pause when there are natural pauses and create enough space for myself to reflect on whether I have any clarifying questions.

Action plan
Take this to supervision to substantiate and extend my plan moving forwards

Appendix P

Participants Photographs and Accompanying Freewrites
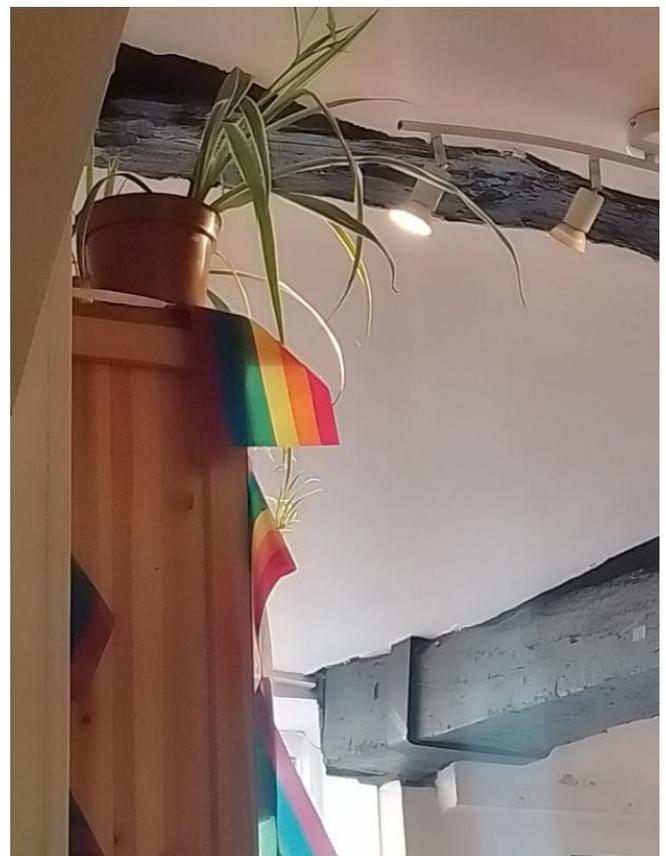
Figure P1

Participant 1

I chose this as it represents a paradox me and my friends have created in a ways to show how our identity is within that moment without having to result to the stereotypes of conformity that are aligned with traditional gender roles and presentations, as such giving us a way of removing ourselves from the binary and gaining control over our presentation and understanding of gender without having to force ourselves into the constrictions of how society feels we should label and identify with our surrounding world.

Figure P2

Participant 2

The first one - my earring collection hahah - is to represent my pride for my gender identity, how I'm not afraid of it and don't try to hide it. Although it's taken me a while to get to this point, my gender is at the forefront of my identity and I am so proud and happy to be non binary!

Figure P3

Participant 3

I feel connected to the natural world, and feel that pride can be linked with growth and life.

Figure P4

Participant 4

Photo 2 is a photo from the perspective of me sitting on my bathroom floor at home. Bathrooms can be difficult places when your body isn't really yours. The hair dye on the counter again symbolises creating yourself and presenting yourself.
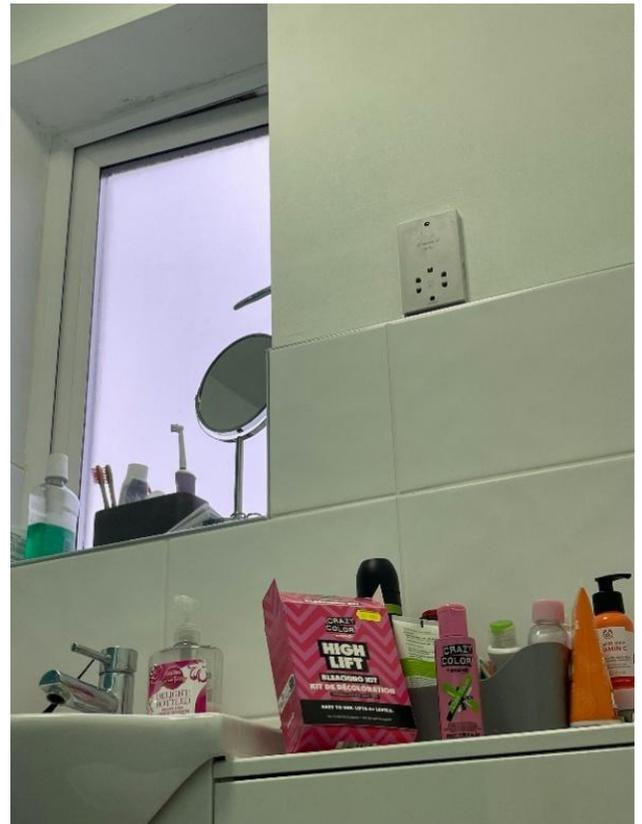

Figure P5

Participant 6

Photo one of the sunset: one of the things I enjoy most after I have had a really difficult day is take photos of the sky. This photo kinda reminds me of the day I came out to my best friend! We sat outside watching the sunset and I was really really scared if how he would react when I told him. He took it really well and told me I was like his brother and would always love me no matter what.
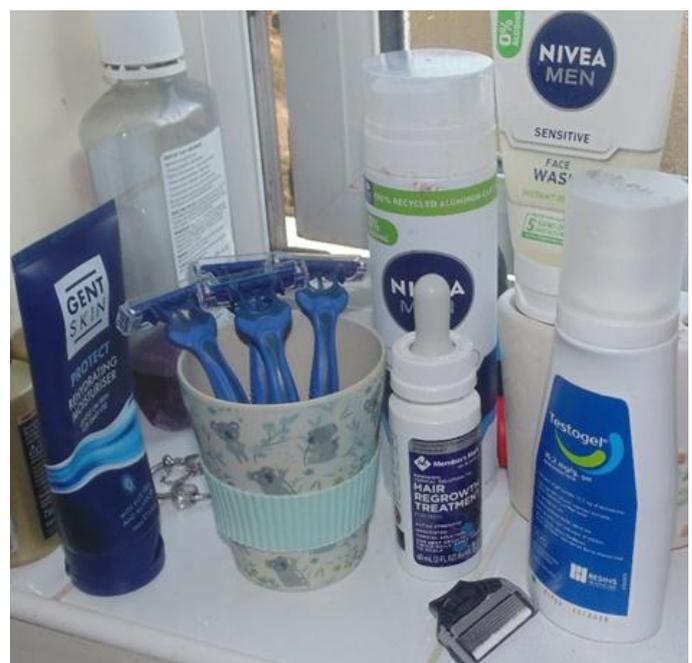
Figure P6

Participant 7

This first photo is of the Hydro Arena lit up after a [artist] concert that me and my girlfriend attended, during the concert I proposed to her with my grandads wedding ring. I took this photo on the way out, it's a moment that made me feel very connected to my grandad. He was a very proud Scotsman and I feel close to him whenever I am in Scotland- it didn't matter that he'd lived in England for the last 40 years, there was always the Scottish flag in the front garden and the royal arms flag over his bed. He passed away before I was able to transition openly and never had the chance to meet my girlfriend either, I am the only grandson so it was very important to my granny that I got his wedding band.

Figure P7

Participant 8

The one named 'shave' is kind of its title? 'shave'. To shave is to lose, to lose is to regain. Shaving's weird as a trans guy - or at least to me. I want a beard but to have a decent beard I need to get rid of the icky first hairs instead of grasping on to what little I have.

Figure P8

Participant 11

These photos that I've taken represent identity to me because they include objects I've collected/received over the years (that now live in my room) from different people and experiences that have shaped me as a person, including events, hobbies, and gifts from past relationships that once meant something to me.

Figure P9

Participant 12

Photograph 1- This photograph links to my identity as it makes me feel nostalgic. It reminds me of being a young child playing football with boys and feeling like i was included with them. I knew it felt right and the big open field makes me feel at home, it made me feel like I could express myself and explore who I am whilst having fun.