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"I got given all these keys": a photovoice study examining master and alternative narratives and nonbinary identity formation in London's queer communities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Nonbinary people may rely on queer communities to resist cisnormative erasure and shape their sense of identity. However, transnormativity within queer communities may repudiate nonbinary identities. The Master Narrative Framework informs our understanding of how cis- and transnormative narratives are negotiated within queer communities, but no study has yet applied this framework to specifically study nonbinary identity formation. Better understanding of nonbinary identity formation is a key task for clinicians and researchers to offer appropriate care to these populations.

Aim: The study aimed to understand trans+intra-community processes and their impact on nonbinary identity formation, exploring dominant master and alternative narratives and developing further recommendations for research in this under-studied area.

Methods: Grounded in a constructionist framework and feminist theory, the study used photovoice. Ten nonbinary individuals were trained on photovoice and participated in focus groups and interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: Findings identified four prevalent master and alternative narratives: *The different one: master narrative of imposters;* and the three alternative narratives of *To be queer is to reject the norm; To be nonbinary is to appear androgynous* and *To be queer is to go out.* Participants' identity shifted and took shape in response to their lived experience of these narratives; however they resisted the pressure to present an unchanging identity.

Discussion: Results were presented in light of previous findings. Further research is warranted on nonbinary identities that looks beyond deficit-based understandings and nuances processes of identity formation and narrative creation.

KEYWORDS

Identity formation; nonbinary and trans; queer community; transnormativity

Introduction

Nonbinary or genderqueer people are those whose gender identity doesn't exclusively fall under the Euro-colonial construct of the gender binary (Chang et al., 2018; Coburn et al., 2023). This includes those who identify as both male and female, neither, moving between genders, a third gender or outside of gender altogether (American Psychological Association, 2018). Nonbinary people are often considered under the transgender (trans or trans+) or queer umbrella of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA+) community (Darwin, 2020), although not all nonbinary people assume the trans or queer label (shuster, 2021; Vincent, 2020).

Academic research on nonbinary people is sparse (Darwin, 2020), with most studies only focusing on adverse mental health outcomes (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). In particular, there is almost no literature exploring nonbinary identity development. Nonbinary people face particularly high rates of erasure within wider society and may therefore rely on community support to uphold and shape their identities (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kuper et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2023). However, little is known of dynamics within queer communities that may shape how they see and define themselves.

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The present study therefore aimed to understand trans + intra-community processes and their impact on nonbinary identity formation. It gathered lived experience accounts of how present and influential master and alternative narratives are in London's trans + community for nonbinary individuals to develop recommendations for research in this under-studied area.

Nonbinary lives in the UK

Nonbinary people have historically been erased in Western societies and they are still frequently subjected to discrimination, microaggressions and rejection due to their gender nonconformity (Coburn et al., 2023). In the United Kingdom (UK) specifically, nonbinary people are under relentless scrutiny due to rising anti-trans sentiment (Pearce et al., 2020) whipped up since the backlash against the 2018 reform of the Gender Recognition Act (Armitage, 2020). According to Stonewall's LGBT in Britain report, 30% of nonbinary people experienced a hate crime because of their gender identity, and 20% have experienced discrimination while looking for a home (Stonewall, 2018). While harder to quantify, nonbinary people are also subjected to institutional erasure, including in mental health services and gender clinics where they face direct discrimination and are confronted with healthcare professionals' stereotyped gender assumptions (Carlile, 2020). As an example, for a nonbinary person to access gender-affirming care in the UK, they need to first fit into the diagnostic requirement of gender dysphoria set out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5 Task Force, 2013), a uniquely unfitting diagnosis for nonbinary people who might not experience gender dysphoria at all (Taylor et al., 2020). Given this context it is unsurprising that treatment-seeking nonbinary youth report even higher rates of depression and anxiety than their binary trans counterparts (Thorne et al., 2019).

Meyer's minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) and Hendrick and Testa's gender minority stress model (Hendricks & Testa, 2012) has been widely applied to explain how this society-wide stigmatization results in negative mental health outcomes for nonbinary people (Linander et al., 2024). Indeed, nonbinary people are more likely to report depression and anxiety than their cisgender or even their binary trans counterparts (Burgwal et al., 2019; Newcomb et al., 2020; Thorne et al., 2019) due to the internalization of transnegativity (Inderbinen et al., 2021).

However, examining nonbinary experiences only through the minority stress models may limit our understanding of how nonbinary people respond to stigma-led discrimination, as it advances a deficit-focused and damage-centered view of nonbinary lives (Levitt et al., 2023), where gender is only seen as source of oppression (Tuck, 2009). Research shows that a repeated platforming of this specific framing may lead to the internalization of these characteristics by nonbinary youth (Russell et al., 2000), leading to feelings of powerlessness (Levitt et al., 2023).

One overlooked aspect of nonbinary identity is how nonbinary people resist erasure and understand themselves despite having close to no role models from the cisgender heterosexual mainstream. Much of this process happens at the queer community level (Levitt et al., 2023). Therefore, better understanding how nonbinary people foster a strong sense of identity and belonging is an important area for further research, where little is presently known.

Queer communities: a place of redefining narratives, mirroring and transnormativity

In response to erasure, many nonbinary people seek out queer communities where they can receive affirmation of their identities (Budge et al., 2014; Doyle, 2022). Indeed, recent research by Compare et al. (2024) demonstrated trans and gender-diverse participants held stronger bonds with LGBTQIA + communities compared to their cis counterparts as they offered them important support against oppression. Crucially, research shows that accessing queer community spaces offers possibilities of exploring one's gender identity for nonbinary people (Lewis et al., 2023): a rare opportunity of mirroring an otherwise erased identity (Kuper et al., 2018). By offering alternative narratives of nonbinary identity, queer communities not only offer a sense of belonging (Barr

et al., 2016) and pathways to self-acceptance (Graham et al., 2014), but enhance nonbinary people's "capacity to resist and counter heteronormative and homonormative messages" (Levitt et al., 2023, p. 2). Better understanding how such communities shape identity development is important, given that communities may serve an important role in resilience and wellbeing.

However, research shows that these alternative narratives do not always offer the sanctuary of affirmation that nonbinary people may need. Research by Sumerau and Mathers (2019) and Gagne and Tewksbury (1998) shows that in parallel with the growth of the trans umbrella, normative ideas of transhood emerged within trans communities. These transnormative (Johnson, 2016) ideals served to demarcate boundaries of belonging and created a framework of what behavior was "trans enough" (Garrison, 2018). Studies by Garrison (2018), Johnson (2016) and Miller (2019) show that intra-group transnormative narratives most often revolved around ideals mirroring the medical model, which seem to be partly cemented in the DSM-V and current cisnormative ideas that expect medical transition culminating in a binary and heterosexual identity. Garrison's (2018) qualitative article evidenced that nonbinary people were particularly affected by this transnormative narrative, wanting to gain recognition as trans by appealing to binary expectations at the expense of their authenticity.

Most recent research shows that transnormativity is being renegotiated in queer community spaces: Sutherland's (2023) analysis of trans online spaces exposed that transnormative medical narratives were being challenged by other demarcations of transness, including ones that centered the experience of physical or social gender dysphoria and others who only relied on self-identification as a marker of transness. Looking at nonbinary people specifically, St. Amant et al.'s recent qualitative study (St Amant et al., 2024) pointed to new transnormative narratives regulating gender performance, such as an expectation to appear androgynous, reject femininity or "break down gender" (p. 11).

While the potential of queer communities to affirm their members is considerable, non-adherence to transnormative narratives may result in exclusion and marginalization within the community (Garrison, 2018; Johnson, 2016), compounding the negative mental health outcomes nonbinary people already face. Research in this field is novel and sparse, especially in nonbinary populations who are most often grouped in with binary trans people in research studies (Burgwal et al., 2019).

Understanding nonbinary identity formation through the Master Narrative Framework

The study relied on McLean and Syed (2015) Master Narrative Framework to analyze nonbinary identity formation in queer communities. Developed from a criticism of earlier models of identity formation, such as Erikson's stage model (Erikson, 1968) and narrative models (McAdams, 2013), this framework offers a structural-psychological perspective on identity formation (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Rather than examining societal context separately, it looks at societal influence as it is internalized by the individual, thus exposing identity formation through the unpicking of interactions between the self and society (McLean & Syed, 2015). Master narratives are "ubiquitous, powerful cultural stories with which individuals negotiate in constructing personal identity" (McLean et al., 2017, p. 93). They are defined by five principles: utility, or their degree of purpose in individual identity development; ubiquity, or their degree of popularity in society; invisibility, or the level to which they have been internalized; compulsivity, or the moral compass they set up that marginalizes those who transgress them; and rigidity, or their nature to resist change (McLean & Syed, 2015). Individuals engage, negotiate and/or internalize master narratives, integrating parts or the entirety of them into their own self-concept (Bradford & Syed, 2019).

For nonbinary people in particular, the dominant master narrative of cisnormativity may play an important part in identity formation (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Bruns, 2023). Cisnormativity assumes that everyone's gender corresponds to the one they were assigned at birth (Bauer et al., 2009), thus rendering nonbinary identities invisible or abnormal (Bradford & Syed, 2019). In response to cisnormativity, queer communities

may take on the role of regulatory agents, negotiating and resisting this derogatory master narrative and co-creating alternative narratives of their own (Schwab & Stamper, 2024). Transnormative narratives have been conceptualized as one such alternative narrative (Bradford & Syed, 2019).

The process of community negotiation and co-creation of alternative narratives, and their impact on nonbinary people is currently poorly understood (Bradford & Syed, 2019), with the only study on this topic—to the authors' knowledge—having been conducted in the US with a mixed nonbinary and binary trans sample (Schwab & Stamper, 2024). Given the importance of belonging (Pipkin et al., 2022) and community mirroring for the wellbeing for nonbinary people (Kuper et al., 2018), better understanding of these processes is a key task for clinicians and researchers to offer tailored care to these populations.

Aim of the study

The research aims to explore trans + intracommunity processes and their impact on nonbinary identity formation. Historically, research on LGBTQIA + communities has been dominantly pathologizing (Zitz et al., 2014), mirroring larger societal oppression that LGBTQIA+, and in particular trans + communities faced and continue to face. Given this reality, the study relied on a feminist framework with due attention given to researcher positionality and broader structures of oppression (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The study aimed to address the following two research questions: 1) How present are master- and alternative narratives in London's trans + community? 2) How influential are these narratives on the identity formation of nonbinary individuals?

Materials and methods

Design

To address the research questions, the study used photovoice, a qualitative arts- and community-based research method. A qualitative approach was chosen firstly for its alignement with the study's ontological and epistemological stance. The authors held a constructionist epistemological position and constructivist ontology, denoting that gender and identity are socially co-constructed (Lincoln et al., 2018) under the constraints of broader structures of oppression (Brisolara, 2014). Secondly, a qualitative approach was favored over quantitative to allow participants to share nuanced individual viewpoints as research shows that this is preferred by trans and nonbinary communities (Staunton et al., 2009). Qualitative research also allows for the acknowledgement of researcher positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2023): a key consideration given the study's feminist lens. Photovoice was chosen due to its particular fit for the topic and population at hand: its combination of self-expression through images and words allows for complex and/or stigmatized thoughts to be expressed (Rolbiecki et al., 2021; Teti et al., 2012), while its underlying philosophy promotes participants as co-researchers (Boamah et al., 2022) allowing to pick out marginalized narratives (Booth & Booth, 2003). Both these qualities were key to examining the research questions as hand: master and alternative narratives are constructed mirroring societal hierarchies, and as such contradicting, questioning or merely naming them may be complex, difficult or even stigmatizing. Photovoice's directions of producing imagery first in the participants own space and time was instrumental in breaking an automatic reliance on co-consructed narratives in one's own sense-making. Comparing and discussing these images then with other participants in the focus groups and interviews allowed for the discerning of commonalities between participants' individual experiences.

Participants

Participants were recruited from London queer digital and in-person spaces. Recruitment was open to any 18+ person living in Greater London, identifying as genderqueer/nonbinary/genderfluid/agender/nonbinary trans/or who feels that their identity is off, beyond and/or across the gender spectrum. It was required of participants to make themselves available at two separate times, and to have a smartphone or camera for photo-taking. There were no exclusion criteria. Participants ($N = 10$) ranged from age 26 to 39

and used various gender labels including nonbinary, genderqueer and trans. Of the 10 participants, 7 identified as White, 1 as Indian British, 1 as Indian and 1 as Irish/Pakistani (Table 1).

In line with Lahman et al. (2015) recommendations, participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms. This decision was made as researcher-imposed pseudonyms may disempower nonbinary participants mirroring the prevalent erasure of their chosen names (Budzan, 2023).

Procedures

Following ethical approval *via* Arden University, flyers were distributed across London queer venues and digital spaces. Prospective participants filled out a sign-up form (accessible *via* a QR code on the flyer) with their name, pronouns and email address signaling their interest. The first author emailed them a detailed Participant Information Sheet, an Informed Consent Form and a Demographics Form. The first author made themselves available for questions during this process and offered several dates for photovoice training and focus group discussions. Following informed consent, each participant then took part in a 45-minute online photovoice training that introduced them to the study and the method and gave them instructions for photo-taking. Participants then had 7-10 days to take a minimum of 3 photos. A summary of the training and instructions was shared after the training, helping guide the process (Table 2). At this point participants were not explicitly introduced to the concept of master and alternative narratives to avoid undue influence. Instead, the research questions shared with the participants were broadened (i.e. "how non-binary people choose labels for themselves", allowing for a more holistic reflection of participants' own positioning and identity through the photo taking process.

Participants were then invited to an online focus group discussion with the alternative option of a 1:1 online interview. Two 2h30 focus group discussions took place with three and four participants respectively. Two participants opted for a 1:1 interview lasting between 45-80 min. One participant chose to respond *via* email. In each case, participants were first asked to present their photos and discuss their experience of the process. Following this, the first author led a facilitated discussion about the key themes and topics that participants' photos raised. Semi-structured questions and prompts were used to focus the discussion on the research questions at hand (Table 3).

Subsequently, participants received a Participant Debrief Sheet summarizing study aims, participants' rights and signposting resources on nonbinary identity and mental health support. The first author offered separate debrief sessions for participants who may have felt affected by the discussions. All online meetings were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author.

Table 1. Summary of participant demographic information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Pronouns	Age	Ethnicity
Jay	Nonbinary trans	They/them	27	White British
Panda	Genderfluid/ Female	She/her	31	Indian British
Taylor	Nonbinary	They/them	39	White
CJ	Demi-guy	He/they	27	White British
Kai	Genderqueer/ nonbinary	They/them	27	White British
Esmeralda	Nonbinary	She/they	38	Indian
Cyan	Nonbinary - male	They/them	33	White British
Louis	Nonbinary	They/them	27	White
Sam	Trans/queer	He/They	28	Irish/Pakistani
Joel	Genderqueer/ nonbinary	They/them	26	White British

Table 2. Summary of the photovoice training including instructions, sent to participants after the photovoice training.

The research questions are:

… how non-binary people choose labels for themselves
… how non-binary people feel within the queer community in London
… who we are as non-binary people

NB: I'm using non-binary here as an umbrella term for anyone identifying as genderqueer/ non-binary/genderfluid/ agender/ non-binary trans/ or anyone who feels that their identity is off, beyond and/or across the gender spectrum.

Think about…

- What does it mean for you to be non-binary/trans/genderqueer/ demi-guy/the label you use?
- What kind of experiences have you had in London's queer community? How did they feel and how do you think they influenced your identity?
- What are people like in London's queer community?
- What is your place in the community?

How to do this…

- You have 7 days to take a minimum of 3 photos – feel free to take more. You can take them anywhere, and they can be anything, from self-portraits to photos of shadows, objects, your pet, your friends, etc. Make sure to ask for consent.
- Have a little think about the above questions and then take photos that feel right or that represent your answer in some ways.
- Remember, the photo does not have to be perfect – and it does not need to say everything you think: you'll have the opportunity to explain the story behind it.

Table 3. Agenda and semi structured interview schedule for focus group discussions and interviews.

5′	Buffer time for those joining late
10′	Introduction by the researcher A run-down of the meeting's schedule, incl. timing of the break • A recap of the project and steps made so far • Reminder of the possibility for participants to withdraw, • Trigger warning and an invitation to come speak to the researcher if any distressing thoughts come up.
10′	Invite for everyone to introduce themselves: names, pronouns and an icebreaker question – if you could be an animal what would you be and why? Setting of ground rules
20′	Reflections on photovoice and the photographing stage Prompting questions by the researcher may include: • How did you find the process of taking photos? • What surprised you in the process? • What did you find the most challenging?
30′	Reflections on the photos: Prompting questions by the researcher may include: • Could you show us the photo you took and tell us a bit about what it represents for you? • What inspired you to take this one? • What does the positionality of X or Y in the photo convey to you? (depending on the photo content)
15′	BREAK
40′	Reflections on emerging themes The researcher will summarize some of the thoughts that came forward during the discussion and ask further prompting questions such as the following. Please note that all these will be TBD depending on the photos and thoughts people share before the break. • How do you feel within London's trans + community? • What does belonging mean for you? • What does it mean to be nonbinary in London? • What does the community mean to you? • What is a trans person meant to look like? • What are nonbinary people meant to be like?
10′	Final thoughts: What was the discussion like for participants? What came up?
10′	Thank you, recap of next steps

Participants' data was stored on a secure driver and handled with full confidentiality in line with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016.

Materials

Microsoft Forms was used to host the sign-up and Demographics Form. A semi-structured interview schedule was used for all data collection. Microsoft Excel and Word were used for the coding process.

Data analysis

Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2023) to discern themes and sub-themes from the participants' photos, focus group discussions, 1:1 interviews and email exchanges. Participants photos were included in the coding and analyzed using visual thematic analysis. The analysis consisted of five stages. After an initial stage of familiarization with the texts and photos through repeated reading, the first author assigned short codes to each unit of meaning (e.g. "male-presenting = perceived as dangerous in queer community"). Codes were continuously revisited and reviewed, gaining refinement and eliminating researcher bias where possible. During this phase, the second author reviewed 41% of the codes. Next, in phase three of the analysis, codes were grouped into themes and sub-themes and a map of themes was created. In phase four and five, themes and sub-themes were revised for coherence, relevance and density, and defined. During these last two stages, the final list of themes was created, defined and reviewed again with the second author.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from Arden University's Research Ethics Committee. Participants were informed in the Participant Information Sheet of the potential risks of the study, and they were provided a Debrief Sheet that signposted to queer mental health support organizations. Participants were offered a follow-up discussion with the first author—a qualified LGBTQIA + Affirmative Counselor—after the data collection. Participants' data was kept strictly confidential, and participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms.

Positionality

The first author identifies as nonbinary trans and considers themselves a part of London's queer community. Having only come out as trans in London, they consider the local queer community to have had a big influence on their gender identity. They are White of Eastern European origin. The second author identifies as a gay, cisgender male who is White British, with clinical and research experience of working with trans and nonbinary individuals. The researchers therefore held both insider and outsider positions in relation to the participants and topic which was considered throughout the design and conduct of the study. Researcher positionality was identified and

managed through bracketing exercises before and after the interviews, the conduct of a personal reflective journal and personal therapy for the researcher and the supervision offered by the second author. The inspiration to conduct the study partly came from the first author's personal experiences of transnormative narratives in London's queer communities. To sift out undue influence, the first author used active listening in interviews and asked open and critical questions, setting aside their own experiences as much as was possible. In the bracketing exercise the first author shared their viewpoint on the research questions with the second author, helping to put in place a mechanism of accountability so that this viewpoint would not unduly dominate the study design, data collection or data analysis.

Results

The thematic analysis identified three super-ordinate themes and five sub-themes (Table 4). Quotes are verbatim. Where required, the use of [] will provide additional context for clarity.

Theme 1: "the different one": master narrative of imposters

Three participants described having had an initial image of London's queer community as one unified block, gatekept by "bouncers" judging whether people were "queer enough" to enter. In this context, they described the criteria of being queer enough as a confident image of a queer person, who was stable in their identity and who would be ready to prove their queerness, if asked. Participants described having realized once they entered community spaces that these expectations were false:

> The first transmasc [transmasculine] event that I went to (…) was one of the scariest things I've ever done. I felt like if I walked in (…) there's going to be a bouncer that's gonna like, ask me to prove something. And that just didn't happen (laughs) unsurprisingly.
>
> Kai

> Another sort of fear I have, I guess is I rock up to a queer space, and they're like 'You're not queer. What are you doing here?'
>
> CJ

Table 4. Table of themes.

Theme	Sub-theme (i/a)	Example quotes
(1) "The different one": master narrative of imposters		"You need to be dressed like that, or you need to like show up like that [at a queer venue]. But it's just like this, this perception in your head, and like the moment you step in, it doesn't fucking matter"
		"I think it [the anxiety of not being queer enough] came from straight from from straight, from heteronormative people. Because I think I was buffering up against like rejection of Nonconformity like and seeing it : as like, oh, you know that I mean, it's a shit example. But, like, you know, pointing out people who weren't fitting in with what was happening in that system. And I think I learned that as like, you have to justify your place or something."
(2) "Every queer group has …:" alternative narratives of the good queer from within the queer community	(2a) To be queer is to reject the norm	"For me, it [queerness] is- It's an ideology like it, it does fall very heavily into, like the ACAB, the, you know, anti-classism, decolonialization, anti-racism, like all of that to me, is part and parcel of my queer community."
		"we're a group of people who ultimately are doing something which is not what we're told."
	(2b) To be nonbinary is to appear androgynous	"Androgyny is the very like, you know, quite seen as like the goal just like trousers and a and a shirt like travels in a T-shirt, you know, like appearing as neutral as possible."
		"Whenever someone says, non binary. The kind of default appearance of what they're thinking of is someone who's androgynous. That's kind of always how it's appeared to me."
	(2c) To be queer is to go out	"I don't fit into the stereotypical media portrayed queerness of being outgoing, clubbing, having relationships etc so that makes me feel slightly outside of it too."
		"The bars represent the like pressure of kind of queer nightlife. And also just often like different spaces that are like the kind of public-facing queer spaces. The pressure of them to perform in a certain way which doesn't really fit my a just a) like anxiety, but also like level of like energy levels"
(3) "I got given all these keys": the influence of alternative narratives on identity formation	(3a) "We're all kind of co-creating who we are"	"we're all kind of co-creating who we are through that bouncing off in a way which feels more…. I've lost the word, more … collaborative in queer spaces"
		"[queer communities] gives me kind of like hope to be able to articulate my own fantasies and to be able to find way to express that explore that."
	(3b) "You have to reduce yourself"	"Often I feel like I'm hiding a part of my connection to my gender underneath what I feel I should be wearing and how I should be appearing as a nonbinary person"
		"I enjoy wearing dresses and skirts and things like that. But, like with the rest of the external things, if I don't go the extra yard, makeup, wigs that kind of thing then… Yeah, it, it just doesn't kind of fit. Even if I'm comfortable. It doesn't fit with other people.

This "fiction image of the trans community", as one participant described it, may have been a master narrative that participants internalized from the cis- and heteronormative mainstream. Its vagueness, grouping all queer people, its allusion to nightlife scenes (a common image of queer people based on stereotyped gay nightlife), its expectation of identity certainty and its focus on the exclusion of those who could or would not "prove" their queerness are particularly notable. One participant directly linked it to having absorbed heteronormative values, being rejected for their nonconformity and always having to justify their place. Another participant connected it to having been "the different one" while growing up, while the third spoke of a habit of casting themselves in the outsider role as a queer person. These interpretations tie into the master narrative of cisnormativity that others nonbinary people: in this case situating them as "outsiders" or "imposters" even in queer spaces, thus isolating them from community support.

In stark contrast, when asked to describe their lived experience of London's queer community, all participants spoke of a great variety of community spaces and ways of being queer, rather than one homogenous image. Three participants said they would not be able to describe the queer community, as it was "too diffuse" and there was "so much difference" across it. One participant distinguished between "pastel queers" and their own community, adding that they both belonged under the queer umbrella, while three others pointed out the vastness of Greater London as a driver of sub-community creation. This did not mean that expectations or "being queer enough" dissipated—as outlined in the next section, they just became more specific to certain identities and group affiliations.

In summary, participants spoke of a range of expectations of gatekeeping within the queer community, as if it was one entity. On entering queer communities, these possible master narratives of needing to justify oneself reduced and changed shape to more specific requirements for belonging.

Theme 2: "every queer group has …:" alternative narratives of the good queer from within the queer community

All participants mentioned transnormative alternative narratives that they negotiated with once they entered London's queer communities. Three dominant alternative narratives emerged from these discussions, presented below.

Sub-theme 2.1: to be queer is to reject the norm

Five participants spoke of queerness as "the rejection of the norm" or of "the systems". Within this narrative, rejecting straightness, mainstream politics and particularly right-wing ideologies was portrayed as a hallmark of queerness:

> Every queer group has at least one person who wants to go and start a commune where you live off the land, and you you… can jams and you have like the kitchen cat.
>
> Taylor
>
> We're a group of people who ultimately are doing something which is not what we're told.
>
> Kai

Suggesting internalization of this alternative narrative, two participants expressed distinguishing between "gay" and "queer" events and/or people: with the former being associated with a stance of conformity to the world they could not see as "queer". Three participants mentioned a police abolitionist stance under this alternative narrative, suggesting that those who disagree could not be "queer": two spoke of it as their own viewpoints, while another expressed their frustration with it:

> Taylor: [speaking of a gay police officer]… enemy in the gates, enemy in the gates! Which is perhaps not entirely fair. You know. She's like idealistic! Gonna change it from within! Eww. No. You're not mine. I don't claim you.
>
> Kai: Fuck the MET [Metropolitan Police]!
>
> Taylor and Kai in conversation
>
> The narrative in queer spaces in London, is that, like everyone hates the police, no trans person would ever be anywhere near the police but like there are trans people who are police officers (…) And presumably have their own version of their queer communities

Sam

Finally, two participants spoke of the exclusion of allies from queer spaces, who were read as potentially dangerous and/or embodied the idea of straightness. Both participants distanced themselves from this alternative narrative with one explaining that it made her disengage from queer spaces. She offered her own definition of queerness in what could be understood as a rejection of this particular alternative narrative:

> Being queer isn't just about, you know, making safe spaces for just queer people. It's also helping, welcoming allies.

Panda

These may be alternative narratives constructed in response to transphobic master narratives nonbinary people are encountering in wider society whereby they are cast into the role—especially by right-wing politicians, the police and at times cisgender and heterosexual individuals—of the Dangerous Other.

Sub-theme 2.2: to be nonbinary is to appear androgynous

Four participants described feeling like they had to appear androgynous to be accepted as nonbinary in queer community spaces. Two emphasized in particular that this image of androgyny was tied together with "thinness and whiteness", while two others mentioned that it was an image of androgyny fashioned after a media image of masculine leaning "AFAB" (assigned female at birth) nonbinary people:

> I think people's perception of me now is like… Oh, they're so confident in their… you know, gender and they they they're so confident in their non binaryness, because I'm more androgynous. But it's only when I'm under the conditions of wearing particular clothing and all this stuff that I actually feel fully accepted for being nonbinary.

Joel

> Whenever someone says, non binary the kind of default appearance of what they're thinking of is someone who's androgynous. (…) and if it doesn't line up with what's in their mind, then they're very quick to kind of reject it (…) They just begin pushing, and eventually it'll just fucking hurt.

Cyan

The four participants found negotiating with this alternative narrative challenging: one found themselves having to hide "a part of their connection to their gender underneath what they feel they should be wearing", while another felt like "it was a moving target" that they could never live up to. This was reflected in one participant's photo depicting superposed shirts. While these participants still identify as nonbinary, some spoke of being rejected and pushed out of London's queer communities for how they appear:

> I will always be seen as a threat. That matters very, very little whether I like. I'm nonbinary, or I am queer or anything like that. If I show up to those [nonbinary] events, I make people nervous. And so those events don't really exist for me.

Cyan

Keeping the nonbinary label despite this rejection may suggest a refusal to integrate this specific alternative narrative.

This view was not shared by all participants. One participant felt that there were no specific expectations toward nonbinary people, while another described nonbinary as an "open-script descriptor" but emphasized that expectations of appearance were ascribed in sub-groups like the transmasc community. While they felt "not just nonbinary" they did not situate themselves in the transmasc community, which may suggest an internalization of this alternative narrative that resulted in ambivalence toward the transmasc label:

> If you said you were nonbinary, I don't think people would be like 'You don't look like a nonbinary person'… like to say I was transmasc I would need to be more like people would expect me to be further along in terms of some kind of transition. (…) I'm not sure if that is what I'm trying to… do. But I definitely also don't just feel nonbinary, like I feel more masculine.

Louis

Sub-theme 2.3: to be queer is to go out

Five participants shared an image of queerness centered around nightlife, going out and hooking up, with one participant calling the queer

community "a dating scene." Four positioned themselves as outsiders to this alternative narrative. Another participant mentioned that they got embedded in the queer community by going out a lot, suggesting internalization of the same alternative narrative. It is notable that this image overlaps with the master narrative mentioned above, that of wider society's image of queerness based on stereotypical gay nightlife, suggesting that it may have been partly internalized.

> I don't fit into the stereotypical media portrayed queerness of being outgoing, clubbing, having relationships etc (…)
>
> Jay
>
> It feels more like a… a dating scene than a community (…) If your goal is to look hot and be attractive to people which often in queer spaces, unfortunately, like…. like in evening spaces. I feel like that's often what people come for. (…)
>
> Louis
>
> There's not like the queer event where we all just like curl up like shrimps, and have a little cry on each other, and not like a cool cry, but like a gross one. (…) There's like a club night where I have to go and try and look hot, even when I don't like feel that great in my body.
>
> Sam

This alternative narrative was reflected in two participants' photos: one depicted a bike outside of a queer venue, mentioning the distance they had to cycle each time to reach a queer event and that they "really wanted something that conveyed that sense of being outside of something". Another participant took a photo of a tree, trapped and held by two metal bars, where "the bars represent the like pressure of kind of queer nightlife". Through the photos, both participants expressed feeling unable to live up to the expectations of this alternative narrative, and at the same time an ongoing attempt to do so. This might suggest a degree of internalization of this alternative narrative implying that one is not quite queer enough if they do not constantly engage in nightlife.

In summary, three alternative narratives were identified by participants, offering hallmarks of queer and nonbinary identity from within queer communities. Participants positioned themselves as in- or outsiders to these narratives, internalizing some and rejecting other narratives.

Theme 3: "I got given all these keys:" the influence of alternative narratives on identity formation

Participants reflected on how their image of the queer community (including that of the alternative narratives presented above) has influenced their gender identity development, sense of belonging and presentation.

Identity development, belonging and presentation was presented as a self-reinforcing cycle in participants' narratives: as they gained deeper understanding of their identities, they adjusted their outward presentation experimenting with pronouns and outfits, explored new sub-groups, and adopted new labels accordingly. Participants spoke of the tremendously helpful impact of queer community spaces that allowed these processes, and of the less helpful impact of those that impeded it. While the former were mostly spaces where alternative narratives could be negotiated, the latter were those that imposed them, forcing participants to adhere or turn away.

Sub-theme 3.1: "we're all kind of co-creating who we are"

> I got given all these keys, and it felt like the biggest like gift (.) felt like I began… I got given a language to really understand my own experiences, and to start to pick out things as 'Oh, that's what that means. That kind of like… uncertainty could actually be this.
>
> Kai, reflecting on the image they took showing a set of keys

Six participants shared positively influential experiences of queer spaces where they were given words to understand who they were, access to like-minded friends and an acceptance for who they could be. In these spaces alternative narratives were held loosely: while they were on display—as keys would be hanging on a carabiner—they were not enforced. Instead, people could try on different identities, labels, names or pronouns and show uncertainty about who they might be:

> I start discovering myself through other people's sort of experiences and questions and perceptions (…) I find in queer spaces, they don't care in the best way possible. Like they're curious, they're intrigued, I am. I ask questions, and … but it's not to be like, oh, you're a man, are you? A woman like kind of thing?
>
> CJ

> It's kind of if I say I'm say them/them this time and she/her next time. That's also okay. You know, it's it's… we're all kind of co-creating who we are through that bouncing off in a way which feels more…. I've lost the word, more… collaborative in queer spaces.
>
> Taylor

Participants spoke of the flexibility of these spaces in ways that suggests a re-negotiation of transnormative alternative narratives to include everyone who was in the room. Four of these seven participants spoke of the kink scene as the space where they felt this fluidity the strongest, and in consequence where they got to explore their gender identity the most. This flexibility in various queer spaces seemed to afford participants with more freedom to try out different ways of expression, such as through dressing or pronouns, that reciprocally shaped their identity development.

Two participants spoke of getting to understand their identity as a group membership thanks to community experiences. For one, their queer identity crystallized in moments of solidarity, while the other spoke of locating a part of their queer identity in the kink scene:

> [In] those moments of transformation when queer people show up for queer people and like support you to push back I have complete, like focus and space, and like clarity that that queerness is an identity that I have.
>
> Esmeralda

This may point on the contrary to the benefits of a strong enforcement of certain alternative narratives—one that helped forge a group identity congruent with these two participants, reinforcing their identity and sense of belonging. Group-level identity seemed important for the development of their own identity. A similar beneficial impact can be observed in some participants' accounts of outward presentation:

> The people who tend to connect with me when I dress in these these very kind of vibrant ways tend to be my people. You know, and the people who tend to ignore me tend to be, not my people.
>
> Taylor

Three participants spoke of having developed a style of clothing thanks to their communities that is not only expressive of their personalities but that helps them bond with other community members. This demonstrates that the alternative narratives, including that of androgyny mentioned above may have helped some nonbinary community members to both develop and solidify their identities and flag their belonging.

Sub-theme 3.2: "you have to reduce yourself"

Four participants described feeling rejected or blocked in understanding their nonbinary identity after interactions within queer communities where alternative narratives were strictly enforced. Identity-specific events, such as "women and nonbinary nights" were mentioned as particularly rigid spaces, where participants felt pressured to perform in a certain way. Participants spoke of these spaces as penalizing experimentation and mentioned their transnormative marketing. These images often tied into the androgynous nonbinary dress code described above:

> When you're in a space being like heavily perceived, or when you are trying to explain how you feel to like other people (…) you have to reduce yourself maybe a bit more, to like being more of a singular like persona.
>
> Louis

The sense of having to reduce oneself did not just come up related to club nights. One participant spoke a queer workplace experience where they felt they had to adhere to a certain alternative narrative of being nonbinary which impeded their understanding of their gender:

> It was like hugely physically stressful. I think probably set me back quite a while in how comfortable I felt being kind of being nonbinary in the sense of like being actively playful with my gender or being ambiguous.
>
> Sam

In response to these negative inputs, some participants outright rejected the alternative narratives at hand, developing their own definition of nonbinary identity and their dressing style. One participant shared a defiant self-portrait (not disclosed in the Annexes, due to personally identifiable information) explaining that:

> I'm myself and it it doesn't really make a difference how I identify or how you perceive me as long as I feel comfortable with myself.
>
> Panda

In these examples, nonbinary identity development was constructed as a counterimage to available narratives. For some, their experiences suggested that constraining environments set back their nonbinary identity development, whereas a sense of comfort within oneself seemed to enable continued identity development.

Others expressed pain over feeling like they did not belong, although it is unclear how and whether that shaped their sense of gender identity.

Unified in these differences, all participants experiencing these negative inputs said that they have chosen to build their community with close (queer or not queer) friends, rather than strive to belong with the wider queer community. They spoke of feeling free of judgment and loved when with friends, rather than in the larger community. This in turn helped them to have more flexible, fluid spaces to explore, learn about and express their identities as they developed, away from the alternative narratives mentioned above:

> I always belong with people who are around me. I don't rely on a broader community acceptance that you can never actually really gain.
>
> Joel

In summary, participants spoke of a strong influence of the available narratives. While for some they provided valuable signposts of belonging, for others they were restrictive and exclusionary. In response, participants' identities shifted as they conceived new definitions of themselves and chose spaces where they felt affirmed. This seemed to have a reciprocally positive or constraining impact on their identity development, with a comfort in oneself enabling a move toward more positive spaces and identity coherence.

Discussion

The present study consulted 10 nonbinary people about the influence of London's queer community on their sense of identity and developed three themes and five sub-themes.

Two types of master and alternative narratives were exposed: Under Theme 1, participants spoke of master narratives in the cis- and heteronormative mainstream that affected them but that they later rejected, such as the narrative of being an imposter, including in queer spaces. Under Theme 2, participants discussed alternative narratives that they negotiated within queer communities: the expectation to reject mainstream norms (Sub-theme 2.1), the expectation for nonbinary people to appear in an androgynous way (Sub-theme 2.2.) and the expectation to participate in nightlife (Sub-theme 2.3).

Transnormativity in London's queer communities

The themes support prior research pointing to the emergence of transnormative narratives in queer communities (Sutherland, 2023). However, this is the first study, to the authors' knowledge, to have applied the Master Narrative Framework to examine transnormative demarcations in queer communities in the UK context specifically. Applying this framework allows for more nuance in spelling out the attributes of transnormative narratives as challengers to cisnormative master narratives (Schwab & Stamper, 2024). The study's findings suggest that—similarly to other studied areas—London's queer communities step into the role of regulatory agents (Mocarski et al., 2019) reacting to master narratives present in the cis- and heteronormative mainstream and co-creating alternative narratives. In this process, new definitions of queerness, transness and nonbinary-ness are created. The reciprocal influence of such dynamics on the self and identity development may be important for shaping congruence and comfort within oneself as a nonbinary person, and warrants further exploration.

Illustrating this process, participants described their initial cisnormative-informed images of queerness as revolving around the image of an imposter (Theme 1). They described how these images were challenged once they got familiar with queer spaces. This particular narrative of the imposter queer has not yet been conceptualized as a master narrative. However, given its potential to isolate queer people from much-needed community support, further research is warranted on its prevalence and its implications.

Participants described alternative narratives in London's queer community dynamically: spelling out how they were influenced by master narratives present in wider society *via* social media, popular culture and everyday interactions. This interplay between transnormative master narratives reflects prior research findings: Johnson (2016) and McDonald (2006) found that intra-group transnormative master narratives often demarcated transness based on ideals directly taken on from cis- and heteronormative mainstream.

However, the study did not find the dominant master narrative of medical model of transness that Garrison (2018), Johnson (2016) and McDonald (2006) referred to. This strengthens Sutherland's findings (2023) pointing to the recent diversification of transnormative narratives within queer communities. To explore whether the medical master narrative is indeed less present in London's queer communities, a further study could investigate whether this master narrative was relevant for binary trans communities in London who might experience higher pressure to adhere to it in the interest of accessing medical support (Puckett et al., 2018).

Instead, participants described alternative narratives of queerness revolving around a rejection of mainstream norms (Sub-theme 2.1) and nonbinary-specific alternative narratives dictating an androgynous appearance (Sub-theme 2.2.). These findings complement previous research: Orne (2017) and Fielding (2020) noted leftism as a key hallmark of queer identity, while St Amant et al. (2024) pointed to expectations for nonbinary people to "break down gender" (p. 11). St Amant et al. (2024) also pointed to androgynous expectations, namely a rejection of femininity. This complements recent research positing that androgyny can play a central role in the formation of gender identity and body ideal for nonbinary people (Cusack & Galupo, 2020; Galupo et al., 2021). Given this combination of findings, a further line of inquiry might be to understand whether the formation of this androgynous nonbinary body ideal is conditional on group affiliation.

Participants also described an alternative narrative of having to participate in queer nightlife (Sub-theme 2.3.). While this narrative may have resulted from a partial internalization of a cis- and heteronormative master narrative, the authors are not aware of other studies examining its prevalence nor the processes of its co-creation. Nightlife has historically been a refuge for LGBTQIA + people especially gay men (Lin, 2021) however its elevation might not serve nonbinary people. Further research could explore the origins and implications of this alternative narrative, in particular taking an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) given that financial means, disabilities and safety all play a part in determining who gets to go out.

Fragmentation of queer communities and of transnormativity

Participants drew a picture of queer community spaces in the plural: speaking of the specific groups and identities they felt affiliation to in contrast to those they did not feel affiliation with. By doing so, participants disturbed notions of transnormativity presented in earlier literature that defined transnormativity as a "zero-sum gain whereby some, and only some, transgender identities can be viewed as legitimate" (Bradford & Syed, 2019, p. 44). Instead, they exposed a fragmentation of transnormativity, where norms of belonging and behavior were set on a sub-group level, with participants finding the normative environment they felt congruence with and leaving behind those they were rejected by. This fragmentation of queer communities and transnormativity complements previous research suggesting that "in-fighting" within trans communities does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes (Sutherland, 2023): instead, it allows for sub-groups to crystallize their group identities and continue to co-exist within the trans umbrella (Shuster, 2019). This was mirrored in

one participant's account who distinguished between "pastel queers" and their community, adding that they both belonged under the queer umbrella. This fragmentation may also be amplified by the geographical realities of Greater London: with a surface area of 1,572 km^2 and nearly 10 million inhabitants, the geography of the city poses real obstacles to holistic community building that some participants mentioned. Further research could explore sub-group dynamics in smaller urban and rural queer spaces in the UK where narratives may differ as LGBTQIA + people face lower visibility and fewer affirmative policies, including at their workplaces (Pipkin & Rodriguez Forero, 2004).

The impact of master and alternative narratives of nonbinary identity formation

The study found that master and alternative narratives were influential in shaping participants' sense of their nonbinary gender identity, belonging and outward appearance (Theme 3). Sense of identity, belonging and presentation were described in a self-reinforcing cycle: as participants gained deeper understanding of their identities, they adjusted their outward presentation experimenting with pronouns and outfits, explored new sub-groups, and adopted new labels. This process provides further evidence to Coburn et al. (2023) emerging framework on nonbinary identity formation, whereby affirmation in queer social circles strengthens nonbinary people's sense of gender identity and leads them to more experiences of inner authenticity. Participants spoke of the tremendously helpful impact of queer community spaces that allowed these processes (Sub-theme 3.1), and of the less helpful impact of those that impeded it (Sub-theme 3.2.). While the former were mostly spaces where alternative narratives could be negotiated, the latter were those that imposed them strictly, forcing participants to adhere or turn away.

Some participants internalized alternative narratives fully, adjusting their appearance and identity labels to those promoted on the group level. This was a voluntary—if not fully conscious—act that participants reported as being helpful to understanding their gender identity—either as a social affiliation or as a personal sense of identity. This supports Turner's self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987) that argued that people may adopt prototypical group norms to achieve congruence with the groups that are most important for their self-definition. A similar process was noted in Todd et al.'s (2022) inquiry on transmasculine identity development. Encompassing both binary trans men and genderqueer masculine-leaning people, the Masculine Identity Development Framework forwarded by this paper proposed that transmasculine people move through an iterative process of identity development composed of envisioning, adoption, questioning and revision: a process through which they negotiate with, integrate and revise images of masculinity received from the people around them, including their community members. The present study builds on the nuances of such models, whereby nonbinary people may navigate and negotiate norms within various group spaces, offering opportunities and constraints for identity development.

Other participants chose to reject or renegotiate alternative narratives that they did not feel congruence with. Intersectionality played into this group's positionings, leaving for example non-White or non-"AFAB" participants with little choice but to reject the androgynous nonbinary alternative narrative. All participants renegotiating or rejecting alternative narratives mentioned that they have chosen to build their community with close (queer or not queer) friends, rather than strive to belong with the wider queer community, strengthening prior research on the key role of chosen friends for nonbinary people (Coburn et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the study showed that nonbinary participants' identity development was influenced by queer community dynamics: participants' outward appearance, self-conception and philosophies shifted dynamically as they sought out connections and mirroring in queer communities. Faced with master- and alternative narratives, some were internalized and some were negotiated, based on their utility and dominance. Most of all, nonbinary participants pushed back against the pressure of having to present a stable intrinsic identity expected both by the cis- and

heteronormative mainstream (Fielding, 2020) and at times by their queer communities, finding spaces that allowed authenticity and gender congruence. This finding contradicts Tatum et al. (2020) and Johnson's (2016) earlier findings that argue that binary transnormative norms are assumed by nonbinary people. The study participants' aptitude for dynamic adaptation in the face of master and alternative narrative suggests that deficit-based understandings of nonbinary identities overlook nonbinary people's capacity for balancing striving for social acceptance with their need for authenticity.

The influence of transnormativity and alternative narrative development on the mental health and identity development of nonbinary people should be researched further. Within trans and nonbinary populations, a systematic review has found that community connection has positive influences on gender and sexuality identity exploration, improves mental health and informs gender transition (Sherman et al., 2020). Given this study's findings, a further line of inquiry could be to understand whether adherence and/or sucessful negotiation with master and alternative narratives may produce a similar positive effect.

Limitations

While the study design aimed for inclusivity, since participants were not compensated, those on lower incomes will not have been able to participate (Largent & Fernandez Lynch, 2017).

Photovoice—while offering flexibility of self-expression—proved to be a time-intensive and emotionally challenging ask that not all prospective participants were able to complete due to other time commitments, and/or disabilities impeding them from taking part in long calls to discuss the photos. In addition, while 30% of participants were People of Color (POC), the master narratives mentioned above seemed to mainly concern White-dominated spaces: while some participants alluded to separate "POC queer spaces", master and alternative narratives of those were not described. Other axes of intersectional identity could be explored in further studies, such as master and alternative narratives around disability, class, immigration status or age. Finally, while all attempts were made to provide space for participants to express their viewpoints, the topic at hand meant that social desirability bias could not be completely filtered out. "Identity management is an interactive process that can be adapted to confront the views and expectations held by different audiences" (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003, p. 163): and as such, the participants might have adjusted their narratives in front of each other and the first author (an in-group member) to seek validation. Using photovoice has allowed to counter this process by giving each participant ample time to create their photographs and narratives before discussing them in focus groups. A future study could combine focus group discussions with follow-up individual interviews to deepen the analysis and counter social desirability bias further.

Implications

Future research in this field should continue looking beyond the deficit-centered narrative of nonbinary identity and develop a more nuanced understanding of gender (Levitt et al., 2023) through pluralistic frameworks that encompasses an acknowledgment of their limits (Linander et al., 2024). Continued exploration of nonbinary experiences through the Master Narrative Framework may offer further learning, as it sheds light on the influence of self-narratives, community processes and alternative narratives—all of which may serve to reclaim nonbinary peoples' agency in the face of cis- and heteronormative oppression. In particular, sub-group dynamics of rural queer communities and POC spaces should be investigated, as well as other axes of intersectionality that may impact alternative narrative co-creation. As with other frameworks, the limits and underlying assumptions of the Master Narrative Framework should be analyzed and exposed. Hypotheses for further exploration are to examine community-, group- and individual-level factors that afford resilience where transnormativity and/or transnegativity may be internalized by nonbinary people, and any impact this has on subsequent identity coherence and health outcomes. For example, sense of belonging, the extent to which norms are internalized, and

confidence may be important factors for exploration to better understand how to facilitate resilience within these populations.

Practitioners working with nonbinary clients should consider the vital role community norms may play in their clients' self-conception and explore the salience of master- and alternative narratives. Medical professionals working with nonbinary clients should apply the medicalised perspective of transition lightly, given diversities in what transition may look like, and an overall absence of a medical master narrative found in this study. Cisgenderist assumptions regulating all policy spaces should be challenged, opening up space for nonbinary people to be validated and offered suitable care.

Conclusion

The present study reflected 10 nonbinary people's experiences of London's queer communities and their own gender identity. It generated new insights into the mechanisms of demarcating nonbinary identities and group belonging and explored prevalent master and alternative narratives within London's queer communities. Participants' nonbinary identity shifted and took shape in response to their lived experience of these narratives, but participants resisted the pressure to present an unchanging intrinsic identity. Further research is warranted on nonbinary identities that looks beyond deficit-based understandings of their identity and nuances processes of identity formation and narrative creation.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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