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Changing Attitudes to *They/Them* Pronouns:
Language and Non-Binary Gender Identities

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Languages and Linguistics
MA by Research

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ABSTRACT

Awareness of non-binary identities and the use of singular *They/Them*, gender-neutral pronouns is increasing and with this, so is the frequency that negative attitudes toward non-binary and transgender identities are shared. Gender studies have well established the importance of acceptance of minority identities and combating bigotry. This study aims to explore what factors are responsible for influencing general attitudes to the use of singular *They/Them* pronouns in order to provide an informed approach to improving them.

To test the hypothesis that factors such as gender and sexuality influence an individual's attitudes to gender-neutral pronoun use, an online survey was distributed to determine what the general attitudes of non-binary identities are. The results showed that gender identity was a large influencer on attitudes with a large portion of results finding that many participants disagreed with gender as an identity marker at all.

These results suggest that gender identity impacts everyone's quality of life and can cause feelings of victimisation when a gender identity such as non-binary threatens to question the status quo of gender norms within a heterocentric society.

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KEY FOR ABBREVIATIONS

AGAB – Assigned Gender at Birth

AFAB – Assigned Female at Birth

AMAB – Assigned Male at Birth

GD – Gender Dysphoria

HRT – Hormone Replacement Therapy

ASD – autism spectrum disorder

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION	P.7
2.0 DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE	P.11
2.1 LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY	P.12
2.2 PRONOUNS IN ENGLISH	P.16
2.3 LANGUAGE AND NON-BINARY GENDER IDENTITIES	P.21
2.4 RESITANCE TOWARD TRANSGENDER RIGHTS	P.27
2.5 PRESCRIPTIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD GENDERED PRONOUNS	P.33
3.0 METHODOLOGY	P.36
3.1 PARTICIPANTS	P.36
3.2 SURVEY	P.37
3.3 METHOD OF PROCEDURE	P.39
3.4 ANALYSIS METHOD	P.40
4.0 DATA ANALYSIS	P.42
4.1 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS	P.42
4.2 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS PART 1: CONTEXT	P.58
4.3 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS PART 2: LINGUISTIC PATTERNS	P.71
5.0 CONCLUSION	P.81
5.1 POTENTIAL USES OF DATA	P.83
5.2 PRACTICAL USES OF RESEARCH	P.83
6.0 APPENDIX	P.84
7.0 REFERENCES	P.91

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to gather data that represents society's attitudes towards the use of singular "they/them" pronouns for individuals who identify as non-binary. Linguists, such as Baker (2008), have proven that social attitudes and language are intrinsically linked. Society has a patriarchal structure that socializes those assigned male at birth differently than those assigned female at birth. These differences can range from trivial, such as the colors one is expected to wear, to life-altering, such as expected career paths or life partners. These expectations have led to the concept of "heteronormativity," which assumes a gender binary consisting of two distinct and opposite genders that are expected to be attracted to one another (Harris & White, 2018).

For individuals who do not naturally find themselves attracted to the "opposite" gender, this expectation can result in compulsory heterosexuality, a term first popularized by Rich in 1980. Rich observed how institutionalized patriarchy defines femininity in relation to men, effectively erasing lesbianism. Women who are not attracted to men may marry out of necessity, but their feelings and sensuality are not contained within this institution (Rich, 1980: p.31). Compulsory heterosexuality causes those who do not find themselves attracted to the opposite gender to date and marry according to heteronormative standards due to fear of repercussions or socialization that does not present alternatives. This issue becomes even more complicated when gender expectations are removed from their rigid binary and queered into something other: non-binary.

In this context, non-binary is an umbrella term for any gender identity outside of the binary genders, male or female (Richards et al., 2016). Throughout this thesis, references to male and female may differ depending on the participant's linguistic preference. While some prefer to describe their gender as man or woman, or even girl or boy, these terms carry the same strict and opposite binary. Non-binary gender identity encompasses any expression from agender (a lack of gender identity) to

omnigender (an affinity to all genders). When referring to non-binary individuals in this research, unless specified otherwise, it is a reference to an individual or an opinion toward an individual that uses they/them pronouns. This is not a universal representation of the language that all non-binary individuals wish to have used to refer to them. Some may choose to use a mixture of gendered and ungendered pronouns, such as she/they or they/he, and in such cases, the former pronoun is the one they wish to be their prominent pronoun. Others may choose to use neopronouns, "pronoun sets that are novel and not (yet) widely established," (Lauscher et al., 2022: p.1), which can appear as xe/xir or the more recognizable mx title, which was generated in the late 1970s and is the preferred title of many non-binary people over Mrs. and Mr. (Gender Census, 2021). Neopronouns may be preferred due to their personal and fluid nature that separates the user from the realm of gendered language. As neo-pronouns are not as represented in mainstream media as commonly as they/them pronouns and due to the fluid nature of this language use, this thesis will primarily focus on collecting data pertaining to the use of only they/them pronouns. It should be noted that this is only a small research paper in an area that needs far more research, as there is a rich and growing community with a wide range of colloquial language specific to those who do not identify with a binary gender recognized within heteronormative society worldwide.

Non-binary is widely recognized as a subcategory of the umbrella term "transgender," as individuals who identify as non-binary typically identify with a gender that differs from their assigned gender at birth (AGAB) (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). While it is a personal choice for individuals who identify as non-binary to decide whether the label of "transgender" fits their gender identity, it is reductionist to believe that these identities can be entirely separated from each other.

This thesis operates under the understanding that negative attitudes towards transgender identities also negatively impact non-binary individuals, regardless of whether they identify as transgender or not. It is true that transitioning from one binary gender to another can generate significant debate and negative attitudes, as this thesis explores. Despite this transition being a product of socialized

binary norms, it has been met with disapproval because it is seen as reinforcing patriarchal standards of gender expectations. This often leads to individuals who do not identify with their AGAB feeling compelled to avoid anything traditionally associated with it. This is due to Gender Dysphoria (GD), which is a condition that causes dissatisfaction with the body, often specific to genitalia, bone structure, hair, and voice (van de Grift et al., 2016). GD is a common but not universal experience for transgender individuals, leading them to seek more than just gender presentation changes; for example, a person who would like to present more typically feminine may undergo hormone replacement therapy (HRT), voice training, and even gender affirming surgery to grow breasts. Similarly, a person who desires masculinizing effects may undergo HRT to grow facial hair, lower their voice, and/or undergo gender affirming surgery. These changes can both utilize and challenge heteronormative ideals ingrained in our society; the rigid binary can offer gender euphoria to those who can identify activities and physical changes that help them socially transition to their true gender. Nayuta explains that gender euphoria is the direct result of healing GD. "Transitioning is a process of dissolving gender dysphoria to achieve gender euphoria" (Nayuta, 2022: p.26). Given this understanding, it is not surprising that non-binary genders, which often seek to reject or queer heteronormative expectations, have become widely debated and attracted the attention of many who hold negative opinions on the matter on social media platforms. Unlike binary transitioning, individuals who identify with a non-binary gender identity do not have rigid forms of binary gender expectations to ease their transition, which can lead to increased confusion and controversy from those who only understand binary gender transitioning.

Arguably one of the most well-known and influential figures who has expressed a negative opinion on the matter is J.K. Rowling in the UK, with the release of her essay in June 2020 titled "Speaking Out on Sex and Gender Issues". In this essay, Rowling expresses her concerns about men infiltrating women-only spaces, such as her own charities, by pretending to be women. These views, along with many of her Twitter posts, demonstrate her transphobic beliefs. The Human Rights Campaign defines transphobia as "the specific hatred and fear of transgender and non-binary people" (2016). This

controversy has attracted organizations such as the transgender charity Mermaids and academics such as Judith Butler, who, it is worth noting, uses she/they pronouns, to speak out against Rowling. Mermaids responded to Rowling's allegations by stating, "Men who prey on vulnerable women are a worldwide problem, but this has nothing to do with trans people" (Petter, 2020). This open letter highlights how the fear-mongering that Rowling fuelled with her Russel prize-winning essay addresses the wrong problem. As Mermaids acknowledges, the problems that Rowling addresses are real and serious, but the perpetrators are not transgender people; rather, it is men who have been socialized within a patriarchal structure that has caused them to view women as objects without feelings or opinions. The fact that this fear and miseducation is being spread by prominent figures in the media is the reason why this research is pertinent at this time. It is crucial to assess how deeply the language used in discourse surrounding this topic shapes people's willingness to adopt language change. Although this thesis primarily focuses on those who specifically use they and them pronouns, it is essential to be aware that these attitudes are harmful to anyone who wishes to use any gender-neutral pronouns.

In this thesis, factors that can potentially shape a person's viewpoint, such as gender and age, will be assessed to determine how strongly they affect a person's likelihood of adopting gender-neutral singular they/them pronouns. The final aim of this research is to cultivate an understanding of the existing attitudes present in society, so that an informed projection of improvement can begin to be explored. The questions that this thesis aims to explore are:

1. Do factors such as gender and sexuality influence attitudes towards the use of They/Them singular pronouns?

This question will be answered by gathering information from each participant about their gender and sexuality, and then analysing how this affects their likelihood of respecting a person's pronouns. Other factors, such as personal context, will also be considered to present a comprehensive picture of each participant's attitude.

2. What is the general tone of attitudes held towards the use of singular They/Them pronouns?

The tone refers to whether the participant is receptive and open to accommodating non-binary identities through language change, or if they are completely against it. Although some responses may be apathetic, it is expected that a strong divide will be discernible due to influences such as Rowling's online presence and other political rumblings that will be further explored throughout this thesis.

3. To what extent does transphobia influence a person's attitude towards non-binary identities and gender-neutral language?

When questioning if transphobia is influencing an attitude, this researcher does not seek to label any participant as transphobic themselves but rather, an awareness of the existence of transphobia and any fear-mongering that transphobic ideology may curate toward non-binary individuals. This question seeks to assess how far the existence of transphobic ideology may restrict how open-minded some participants may be about changing their language to accommodate non-binary identities. When considering this research question, this researcher's positionality is especially prudent; as a non-binary person who uses they and them pronouns, this researcher may be more minutely aware of the more subtle workings of transphobia that can be seen in micro-aggressions and even apathy.

These questions seek to feed into the overall question of exactly what attitudes the population of this study hold toward non-binary individuals and if there are any common factors or circumstances that are more likely to cause attitudes to lean to one extreme or the other. The overall aim of this research is to provide a starting point to guide attempts to improve negative opinions so that people either in organisations such as an educational institution or workplace, or even just on an individual level, steps can be taken to create a space in which non-binary people and by extension any minority figure that may experience discrimination, is not made to feel uncomfortable or endangered because of who they are.

2.0 DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE

Although some of the literature discussed in this section is not from the discipline of linguistics, it provides useful contextual information. The following sections of this discussion provide a general background of gender and sexuality research in the field of linguistics, a history of English pronouns with an emphasis on their presence in legislation, general research on identities to show how they are formed within society, and research demonstrating the debate and controversiality of this subject. With an understanding gained from this literature review, the aim is to outline how They/Them pronouns fit into the field of research and what linguistic and social action could be taken to improve the lives of those affected by negative attitudes towards non-binary identities.

2.1 LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

When exploring attitudes towards gender and sexuality-related topics, it is essential to consider the origins of mainstream linguistic analysis in this field. The following research that will be presented is now regarded as outdated and oversimplified. Nonetheless, it forms the foundation of gender theory presented to most A-level English students in the UK and has shaped the understanding of gender for multiple generations. While the current A-level curriculum encourages critical thinking and arguments against these outdated theories, this level of understanding is reserved for those who aim for higher grades. The average student who did not pursue higher education may not have access to updated research. In 1980, when this research was published, there were 68,000 graduates in the UK compared to 430,000 graduates in 2019 (Coughlan, 2019), indicating that older generations are more likely to be influenced by this early research.

One of the linguists, Lakoff (1973), created a list of speech markers, such as tag questions and indirect requests, that Lakoff claimed were more common in women than men. Lakoff concluded that men and women are different; men are assertive and logical, while women are nurturing and illogical. Other linguists, such as Grey (1992), who wrote *Men are From Mars and Women are from Venus*, and Fishman (1978), who put forward the Dominance Model, used the term “Shitwork” to demonstrate how women bear more responsibility for others’ emotions during a conversation. Tannen (1990)

echoes these findings in her Difference Model that separates men's language and women's language into the categories "report" and "rapport". Men use report, seeing language to have a transactional purpose, and women use rapport, seeing language as something to build relationships and convey emotion. These are just a few examples of how linguists from the late 1970s to the new millennium focused on highlighting the differences in the way men and women used language.

All of this early and arguably outdated research supports the idea that women are more emotion-based in their language use, whereas men are more action-based. However, all these linguists fail to acknowledge that their data set focused on white middle-class groups, where the research candidates would have been divided into "housewives" and "men who work in the office or managerial roles." Therefore, this research does not offer a fair representation of any diversity of class, identity, or race. Furthermore, it does not consider what any of the possible similarities could be; it actively seeks to differentiate man from woman and fails to acknowledge that these differences that are found may be based upon intersecting factors such as social class. This sort of binary research, in which the differences between men and women are explored, does not allow for growth in research on non-binary genders and presents the gender binary as a given fact that is never questioned or challenged.

Lakoff, Fishman, and Tannen are all prominent figures in current gender and language research (as of 2022). However, because this research offers no space for identities that do not fall into the binary categories of man and woman, even students who question the legitimacy of these theories will most likely do so in a binary manner of thinking. It is true that when critical thinking is encouraged, it is easy to question these models of Dominance and Difference and instead celebrate similarities. However, the very existence of these models in the curriculum sets the precedent for binary discussions around gender and language.

Eckert (2003) explores how what is believed to be common sense when it comes to gender and sexuality may be rooted in the heterosexual matrix as it is outlined above. Eckert observes that many believe that it is common sense to say that women are more nurturing, and emotion driven while men

are assertive and logical, but Eckert also points out that it is harmful to both groups of people and even more harmful to those that cannot place themselves within those categories. Similarly, Sedgwick's *Queer and Now* (1994) echoes the importance of understanding the restrictions of Butler's heterosexual matrix. Sedgwick begins this essay with a lament on the lost lives due to suicide that has resulted from continued discrimination and estrangement from family, friends, and society itself. It is true that even in a supportive community, those that identify as something outside of the cisgendered heterosexual norm face internal conflict as they must confront the disjunct between their perception of themselves and how wider society perceives them. In this situation, the heterosexual matrix is still in power; even when one goes against what is seen as the norm, a person identifying as queer or just not cis or straight, may actively seek to avoid styling themselves in a way that would reflect societal norms or even choose different linguistic patterns to distance themselves from the binary structures that exist and yet the heteropatriarchy is what dictates what is seen as different. Sedgwick's research frames this to be a rebellion or breaking free as without the presence of the heterosexual matrix, there would be no binary from which to divert. Therefore, in the absence of the heterosexual matrix, linguistic and stylistic differences would not be an indicator of anything but personal preference. In some spaces, as Sedgwick acknowledges, it is unsafe to visibly distance oneself from the binary and the performance that is required to be safe within the heterosexual matrix fatally harms those that cannot find a place within it. It is for this reason that it is important to understand the history of gender and the language we use to address it to unpack why there is a need for more inclusive language which moves away from static, binary constructions of gender – and this includes inclusive pronoun use.

Looking toward work that has been published more recently, there is an apparent shift in research which makes assumptions about gender as a binary construct towards a greater focus on what non-binary identities contribute to our language use and societal understandings of gender. There is a greater shift from approaching gendered language from a binary viewpoint and instead exploring minority groups and celebrating differences. This is helped by academia no longer being completely dominated by white male researchers and more opportunities for diversity. Linguists such as

Ravashanova have explored how social gender expressions are reflected in changes of language (2020) While King explores how intersex bodies are forced into existing in a binary way because of the way language and politics intersect, leaving no space for intersex bodies to exist peacefully (2022) King's research explains that there is no existing and widely used language to refer to intersex individuals; they are very rarely assigned intersex at birth but rather parents encouraged to pick a gender to raise their child as. This often leads to the intersex individual feeling displaced and isolated despite the fact that it is estimated that 1.7% of the population are intersex, the same percentage as those who have red hair (United Nations for Equality, 2015). These progressive stances give a push toward exploring gender and sexuality in a more discursive and complex manner but, as explored by Weigman and Wilson (2015), queer theory rests upon this definition of "other" sometimes too much. The following quote summarises these notions:

"What might queer theory do if its allegiance to antinormativity was rendered less secure?"
([Weigman & Willson, 2015: p.2] in Hall et al, 2019: p482)

Though rhetorical, the logical answer to this question would be nothing. Queer theory would be rendered obsolete if it was not seen as "antinormativity" - the theory rests on the queer identity being seen as the opposite of normal society and if attitudes changed and allowed individual identities to flourish and queer theory would hold no consequence in such a society.

Hall et al (2019) explore how this notion of resting upon antinormativity (the view that queer theory is the opposite of whatever a society considers the 'norm') queer theory prevents the progression of language used in queer theory discussion to become a part of the norm; it is therefore necessary to open up the discussion of gender and sexuality into the functions of politics and nuance instead of simply referring to what is the "norm" and positioning queer theory as outside of this. Hall's evaluation of this concept highlights how it can be damaging to position all work regarding queer theory as "other" as though it will never be an accepted part of society. This concept can be seen as regressive as it places any group that does not conform to heteronormativity as a minority group when it is in

fact a much larger group than previously considered, it has just been oppressed; while queer theory can question and expand our knowledge of “normality”, it is important to use the information to empower and protect diversity, not to cast it further from society.

2.2 PRONOUNS IN ENGLISH

The purpose of this section is to outline the etymology and related social context of English pronouns. This section will also briefly discuss research on neo-pronouns alongside standard pronouns used in English grammatical systems. In order to understand how the use of these pronouns are being shifted in a movement for gender-fair language, it is important to understand the structures of language that are the universal expectation. Exploring the relationship between gender and colonisation is also a useful tool for understanding the conflation of language and identity as there is much research that explores how colonising countries have used their power to erase identities that they felt would threaten the status quo.

The definition of a pronoun in the context of the English language grammar system is that one uses pronouns when one wishes to refer to a noun that has been pre-established in writing and conversation. Some common examples of pronouns consist of the gendered variation of He/Him/His and She/Her/Hers, the standard use of They/Them/Theirs as a plural pronoun used to refer to a group of people who are not present, used in tandem with the broad we/you/us used to refer to a group of people who generally are present. The results of the research that is to be carried out within this thesis often use notions of what is correct grammar to validate their opinion. As such, it is important to consolidate an understanding of what is regarded as “correct grammar” in the use of pronouns. Pronouns are not in fact a subtype of a noun but a subtype of a determiner (Postal 1969). It is often observed that many native speakers commit grammatical “errors” pertaining to pronouns that do not interfere with communication. These errors are reportedly much less common in speakers who have English as an additional language and so it is theorised that in the name convention, grammar should always be corrected in an educational setting regardless of the communication and implicature being

unimpeded (Ur, 2009). Historically it has been viewed that it is a common understanding that a generic he can be used to refer to an individual of note who is not present and the gender of whom is not known, automatically marking any gender other than male as Other. In the wake of second wave feminism, however, there has been an argument for more gender-fair language use; the epicene They is advocated for as Paterson (2014) explores. The epicene They (wherein They is used to fill the pronominal gap to refer to a singular person for whom the gender identity is unknown) is affected by social influences which are predominantly consistent of the time period of which they are used, as Paterson (2011) notes how newspapers favour the epicene He before 1961 and They is favoured after 2007/8. Foertsch and Gernsbacher (2015) also explore this by measuring the reading comprehension of research participants and conclude that existing stereotypes affect the cognitive reading pattern when a participant's pre-existing expectation of pronoun use is challenged. Sczesny et al (2016) cite Paterson's work to explore how Gender Fair Language use can work to change gender stereotypes. The awareness of gender binaries and transgender identities which can include non-binary identities, has grown exponentially from the time at which Butler introduced their heterosexual matrix model.

It is understood that language users use two sources to determine what pronoun to refer to a subject as. One being a use of properties such as gender, animacy and number and the other, more complex source is accessibility. The accessibility of possible references is often determined by gaining an understanding of pre-existing linguistic and social context (Arnold et al, 2007: 529). In their study on child language acquisition of pronouns, Arnold et al use eye movement experiments to track children aged 3 to 5's understanding of pronouns and its link to gender. The study shows that the participants in the experiment showed the same capacity to assign pronouns based on gender as adults but children younger than 5 struggled more to identify characters if there were multiple characters that used the same gender marker, favouring to identify only the first-mentioned character rather than all characters using a specifically gendered pronoun (cit op). What this study tells us is that using visual and linguistic context to identify a subject is something we learn (or are taught) to do from an early age.

Neo pronouns have been introduced briefly in section 1.0. In recent times, these types of pronouns have been gaining more mainstream popularity but are by no means a new phenomenon. The set of “ey/em/eir” was created in 1975 by Christine M Elverson (McGaughey, 2020: p.1). McGaughey identifies that the English language, unlike other languages, only identifies gender through third person singular pronouns (she/her/hers and he/him/his) and while Merriam Webster’s word of the year was “they” in 2019, general acceptance of the term as a singular pronoun has not completely taken off (cit op). In McGaughey’s explanation of neo pronouns, the debate over the effectiveness of neo pronouns even within the transgender community is also discussed. McGaughey shows data from interviews both with individuals that feel that neo pronouns give a more accurate representation of how they truly feel whereas another interviewee expresses concern that offering too many combinations will discredit non-binary people on a whole and make general society see them as childish people who want to feel special and therefore not be taken seriously. The latter argument appears to be affected by related activism pertaining to autism; the research completed in 2019 and 2020 shows that there is a high chance that autism affects an individual’s relationship to gender (Hiller et al, 2019) (Stagg & Vincent, 2019) (Hall et al, 2020). What much of this research has in common is infantilisation of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The latter statement alludes to how anything that is typical to neurodiverse experience is often construed as childish and immature despite it simply being a different way of processing information. Both statements hold merit and show that the problem here clearly lies in the negative attitudes of those who do not understand and will not try to understand the difficulties of the non-binary experience which is why understanding what the core factors are in forming such opinions is so important to identify in order to improve general acceptance.

Research shows that there is a noticeable lack of protections for gender identities in legislation (Trainer, 2021); though the historical bias toward the male sex has had steps taken to remedy this with the inclusion of the stipulation “The principle of equality shall not prevent the maintenance or adoption of measures providing for specific advantages in favour of the under-represented sex.” Included in article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (cit op: p. 58),

Trainer aptly observes how this completely overlooks the existence of alternative genders outside of cisgender male and female and they go on to say: “This general lack of uniformity in how gender identity is represented in EU legislation can be interpreted as a manifestation of what Takács (2015) calls institutionalized heterosexism, or the belief, stated or implied, that heterosexuality is theologically, morally, socially, emotionally, behaviourally and/or in some other capacity, superior to homosexuality (Takács, 2015)” (cit op: p. 59) In other words, the heteronormative society in which this legislation is created completely overlooks gender identity and leaves those who have a non-binary gender unprotected in the eyes of the law.

As cited below, there are also bills that have been passed that make it incredibly difficult for a non-binary person to legally change their gender identity or worse, make it legal for them to be forced to undergo conversion therapy. Despite promises given by the British government to completely ban conversion therapy in December 2021, political leaders chose to drop the ban on April 1st, 2022 (Open Access Government, 2022). With immediate backlash to this announcement, governing bodies agreed to the ban but only for gay and bisexual identities; not transgender conversion despite the percentage of transgender individuals to be offered conversion therapy being higher than that of those who are gay or bisexual (cit op). Conversion therapy is especially damaging as research such as that by Trispiotis and Purhouse (2022) demonstrates how when an LGBTQIA+ individual is exposed to these conditions, they experience the same psychological damage as a survivor of torture which calls to question why this isn't protected under anti-torture laws. The answer is rooted in institutionalised heterosexism.

Despite recent protests of thousands of UK citizens gathering to protest for the government to include transgender people in the conversion ban bill of 2022 (ITV news, 2022), there seems to be incredibly little improvement. Laws are being passed to force transgender people to use single sex spaces that reflect their AGAB allowing businesses to force transgender people to be outed as such and into the uncomfortable and potentially dangerous space that reflects their assigned sex (Milton, 2022). This is a step backwards and impacts those of non-binary genders even more as this indicates a movement

away from gender neutral spaces. Even when gender neutral spaces are offered in addition to single sex spaces, these are often simply disabled access toilets that are repurposed as gender neutral, giving the incorrect notion that non-binary is a disability which is worsened by the stereotypes that a non-binary identity is the result of a person's childish wish to be special (McGaughey, 2020) in the beginning of this section.

Who is it that creates and authorises this legislation? It is no coincidence that the percentage of men in power is higher than that of female leaders as shown in a recent study by the UK government that observes that Women make up 31% of parliamentarians, there are 225 female MPs in the House of Commons and 237 in the House of Lords, female representation is slightly higher in the Commons than the Lords, at 35% and 29% respectively (Oberoi and Mansfield, 2023). Brooks (2013) unpacks the theoretics of gender stereotypes and how they are so important to the way we view gender. Brooks states it is noticeable that women are expected to be more communal, warm, and nurturing than men and it is often seen that women will perpetuate this stereotype because it is seen as a good thing. Brooks explores how this affects women who wish to break into male dominated careers and refers to what is known as the "glass ceiling" as more of a "labyrinth" because of the double standards of needing to act like a "leader" but still fulfil her 'womanly duties. This is an indication that governing bodies are not opened to changing their attitudes on subjects that are much more widely discussed than non-binary identities and such fair language use of pronouns is often completely absent from legal documents thus demonstrating a lack of movement toward using gender-fair language and eradicate gender biases in order to take a step toward gender inclusivity.

2.3 LANGUAGE AND NON-BINARY GENDER IDENTITIES

This section introduces existing research on language and identity on a whole before focusing on non-binary identities and why research on this specific topic is so significant. One of the simplest ways to understand how gender fits into broader identity theory is through the work of Althusser and the interpellation theory. Althusser explains: we can all recognise ourselves as subjects in that we have a

name by which we respond to, the theory of interpellation observes that then these subjects can be “recruited” or “hailed” into a certain category, much in the sense that if a police officer shouts “stop, thief!” in your direction, whether you are or are not a thief is irrelevant – in that moment, your identity is encapsulated by this hailing (Althusser, 2001: 118). With the understanding of interpellation as such, it is simple to draw the conclusion of why having a non-binary identity is so controversial and damaging to mental health. It is not the non-binary identity that falls underneath that umbrella that is cause for issue, rather it is the way society hails an individual in accordance with upbringing. Childhood and adolescence are prime periods of life in which we develop our sense of personal identity, according to Erikson ([1950] 1994). Narratives set to us, especially within this time, serve as “a framework for constructing the narratives of our own lives” (Ricoeur, [1995] 2007 in: Manifold, 2009: p.8). Under the theory of psychological development, identity can be seen as something developed throughout childhood, as such if one begins to identify differently from the gender they were assigned at birth, it can both mentally and socially affect how one interacts with society. In this scenario, to use Althusser’s analogy, the police officer may hail you as a thief and though you still recognise that it is you that the police officer is shouting to, you are not guilty of robbery and so there arises a new layer of uncertainty and concern. In this instance, the analogy provided by Althusser is especially apt as it also lends the connotation that the interpolated subject does not wish to be addressed in the way that they are being.

Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004) ‘tactics of intersubjectivity’ framework uses an evaluation of “queerspeak” through multiple methods including feminist and queer theory, they conclude that the matrix of identity is ever shifting and ever-changing, this means that it is highly unlikely that any one person will identify in the same way their whole life. This is especially evident for identities in Gender and sexuality. Plausibly influenced by the aforementioned heterosexual matrix, identifying how one fits into any identity label outside from what is understood to be the ‘norm’ can be incredibly difficult, especially if the subject has limited information on the intricacies of gender and sexuality. Tactics of Intersubjectivity outlines how there are many varied factors such as social class, race and gender that

can influence how any one person may identify, and if the subject is exposed to a new factor later in their life, this can affect how they identify. In the field of gender and sexuality, it is important to understand that age and any number of other factors can influence a person's understanding of themselves and society; just because a person may identify as a cisgendered lesbian woman in their teenage years and then later in life find that they are attracted to some people of the opposite gender and identify as a non-binary bisexual trans-masc, does not intrinsically cancel out all other identities they have ever held and all life experiences collude together to create a personal understanding of identity that is much too complex to simplify into one label. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) demonstrate this fluidity with the sliding scale category pairs of: adequation and distinction; authentication and denaturalisation; authorisation and illegitimation.

Adequation and distinction refer to sameness and difference; Bucholtz and Hall offer the example of political sameness in the interest of peace. "In response to the Los Angeles uprisings following the trial of the police officers who beat black motorist Rodney King [panellists constructed the term] African American Identity (Bucholtz, 1996); this temporary unity was conditioned by political events and [indicates that panellists] are committed to a common identity." (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004: p. 384). This example offers a clear reason for the importance of sameness within a social setting and demonstrates how labels and identities can be essential for the safety of minority groups. The research indicates that adequation and distinction cannot occur naturally, the social need will arise, and then social action must be taken to ensure that the need is met.

Authentication and denaturalisation refer to an identity that is expected and considered real and the opposite; an identity that does not fit with the status quo and will be considered unnatural or wrong. "The fact that many male-to-female transexuals in the United States appropriate the stereotypical features of what Lakoff identified as "women's language" suggests that authentication necessarily works through singular and essentialist readings of particular identities and their language practices." (Cit op: p. 386). This example outlines how some language users choose to follow the stereotypical

archetypes of a certain identity in order to validate their own; a trans woman may feel like they have to use language in a certain way in order to feel that their identity is authentic. Denaturalisation on the other hand, seeks to dismantle and disrupt the stereotypes that are used to authenticate an identity. Black drag queens are an example given by Bucholtz and Hall as studied by Barrett (1999 in Bucholtz Hall, 2004) as the Ball scene seeks to “regularly disrupt their performance of white femaleness in order to question the naturalness of categories of race and gender,” (cit op: p. 386).

Finally, authorisation and illegitimation refer to the amount of power an identity is afforded by a body of institutionalised power. This can be a global concept or a privatised one as governed by a body such as the United Nations or a parent or guardian to a child. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) explain that authorisation “can contest as well as confirm dominant forms of power,” (P: 387). Equally, “illegitimation may in turn result in a new set of authorising practices,” (cit op). This demonstrates how bodies of authorisation can be influenced by language to change the structure of hegemony; where one identity such as homosexuality may be ostracised and outlawed – illegitimised - it will seem to hold a minority in society but upon authorisation, more people can feel safe to explore the identity and share their experience.

With the understanding that the addition of one identity does not cancel out that of another, it can be better understood why non-binary individuals struggle to gain an understanding of themselves and provide an explanation to others. For example, an AFAB individual who begins to explore feelings of GD that is not remedied by a binary transition like a FTM individual, will remain to have lived experience as a woman and if a physical transition is not thought necessary to that individual, they will continue to be socialised as female by strangers reading them as such. This co-existence of identities and experiences is explored in a study that explores how the percentage of non-binary survey participants greatly varies between different studies with one study by the UK government equalities office (2018) estimated 52% of a sample of 14,203 trans people identified as non-binary while a much smaller 20% of participants identifying outside of the gender binary in a comprehensive

literature study by Bouman and Motmans of the same year (Monro, 2019). Though this discrepancy can be explained by the differences in participants to individual studies along with the different methods of data collection, this large difference can also be accounted for by the ever-changing definition and fluidity of gender identity causing both external and internal factors to cause uncertainty around non-binary identities. There is much evidence to support that exclusion is a large part of the non-binary experience which has a profound psychological effect on individuals of this identity as demonstrated by research from gender health clinic patients (Taylor et al, 2019; Burgwal et al, 2019). Both social and medical isolation creates a situation that prevents non-binary individuals from sharing their personal experiences. This also prevents professionals from learning this information in the general medical field, of which is often the first point of contact for non-binary individuals looking to treat their GD.

Research shows how profound an affect media has on forming one's identity. Social and cultural identities can be shared with speed and clarity that was unknown to the world before the world wide web and broadcasting as Stevenson (2019) demonstrates in their research showing the affect media has on identity causing an influx of "identity crisis". This relatively recent method of sharing experiences makes "finding yourself" both much easier but also much harder as there is more immediate information about different cultures and identities. The mixture of public and private information provided across media also invites controversy and gatekeeping as a critical discourse analysis of tumblr posts explores how the term "trans" is to be identified and whether or not an individual can be truly transgender if they do not experience GD (Jacobsen et al, 2022). This highlights how media can provide a platform for discussion and education on minority groups but also can become isolating when people who share the same identity do not agree on specific markers of said identity. This is especially common for an identity that's primary feature is not something – not binary – which supports Hall's concern on how queer theory is too antinormativity (Hall et al, 2019). Differences need to be celebrated, accepted and information shared by those who have lived experience, not discussed as a research theory by people who simply observe from the outside in

order for attitudes to be improved. Gatekeeping is discussed in more detail by researchers who explore how gatekeeping can restrict knowledge in schools in a heterocentric manner, like the omission of sex education outside of the heterosexual norm (Ryan, 2020) and from an internal manner, where groups restrict members who share an identity from interacting because they are not “trans enough” or “disabled enough” unless they have medical affirmation of their identity (Gibson, 2016). Gibson explores how this internal gatekeeping is an extension of external gatekeeping; where one group had to fight for acceptance, they in turn wish to hold the other group to the same standard they had to face instead of helping to pave the way to more accepting and understanding views on identity that do not depend upon an official diagnosis. This kind of gatekeeping can be seen in ‘transmedicalism’ which is the belief that an individual is not trans unless they experience GD and undergo surgery and HRT to ‘fix’ their body. If someone holds this view, they may try to gatekeep a person from identifying as transgender unless they are “treating” it. This type of gatekeeping is especially harmful as it can prevent the circulation of support and recourses to people who need it. On top of this, many people who identify as transgender are unable to undergo HRT or gender affirming surgery due to reasons such as simply unable to afford it or not having access to those things. Furthermore, it is reductive to frame being transgender as something that requires “treatment” as it is not an illness and there are many individuals who identify as transgender but do not have the desire to change anything about their body. To make things more complicated, a transmedicalist is not always someone outside of the transgender community, which they use to legitimize their beliefs that are often targeting members of the transgender community who don’t ‘pass’ as the binary gender they are transitioning to (Kisner, 2019).

Though media allows negative and contradictory information to be spread, when representation is shared in a non-judgmental and accurate manner that allows minority identities to be seen as human beings, it can be life-saving as explored by researchers such as McInroy and Craig (2015) who analyse transgender youth’s responses to online and offline media representation showing that having a representation of themselves made them feel less alone and more able to accept themselves for who

they are, and Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) who observe how positive representation of gay characters result in lowered rates of homophobia. The same would likely be said for representation on non-binary identities if the representation existed widely enough for more research to be carried out on the topic.

2.4 RESISTANCE TOWARD TRANSGENDER RIGHTS

In June 2020 JK Rowling, well known for authoring the Harry Potter book series, published a personal essay entitled Reasons for speaking out on sex and gender issues, which won 3rd place in the 2020 Russel Prize for best writing (Rajan, 2020). Though the views that are discussed in this writing are anything but new, this particular essay sparked the rise in debating transgender rights. It should be noted that this was not a peer reviewed article but is incredibly relevant to the context of this thesis.

The beginning of her essay seeks to trivialise the meaning of TERF:

If you didn't already know – and why should you? – 'TERF' is an acronym coined by trans activists, which stands for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist. In practice, a huge and diverse cross-section of women are currently being called TERFs and the vast majority have never been radical feminists. Examples of so-called TERFs range from the mother of a gay child who was afraid their child wanted to transition to escape homophobic bullying, to a hitherto totally unfeminist older lady who's vowed never to visit Marks & Spencer again because they're allowing any man who says they identify as a woman into the women's changing rooms. Ironically, radical feminists aren't even trans-exclusionary – they include trans men in their feminism, because they were born women. (Rowling 2020)

Firstly, Rowling's questions "why should you?" immediately positions the reader as someone who has no contextual experience of the nature of this essay and effectively ostracises readers that have good reason to know what TERF stands for. Furthermore, her argument that a person who willingly ignores a trans man's identity and lumps them in as a woman due to their AGAB effectively makes them trans

Inclusionary is not true and indicates the overall understanding of the issue has been largely influenced by transphobic ideology.

Rowling goes on to discuss fears over changing the legal definition of sex to gender, expecting that this will affect her women centred charities: "Among other things, my trust supports projects for female prisoners and for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse," (Rowling, 2020). Rowling specifies that the "females" that she seeks to help have often been victims of sexual abuse which, in the context of wishing to exclude transgender people from her charities, highlights that the fear that trans women are just men in dresses that seek to invade women's safe spaces in order to attack them is at the heart of these anti-trans views. Rowling also invokes concerns around safeguarding in schools and quotes a statistic that 60-90% of teenagers outgrow dysphoria; this statistic was not backed up by any source. The social media outrage at the BBC rewarding this piece brought great attention to it, which has subsequently produced an abundance of academic responses to the matter. For example, in an open letter to Rowling, Mermaids, a charity for non-binary and transgender people, respond to assuage Rowling's concerns over single sex spaces being invaded with "Trans women are already entitled to use the facilities that align with their gender identity, and those protections have been in place since the Equality Act 2010," (Petter, 2020).

Rowling's transphobic ideology arguably became more sinister upon the onset of unrest between Russia and Ukraine in late 2021 following ongoing political unease starting when Ukraine joined NATO in 2008 (Jha, 2022). Putin, leader of Russia and prominent global figure invaded Ukraine in March 2022 to "protect" Russia from NATO forces which Russian authorities have constructed as Nazis to the Russian public (Kirby, 2022). He has also been accused of being involved with concentration camps for gay men in Chechnya where prisons are set up for the sole purpose of torturing men who are homosexual (Roy, 2017). In early April 2022, a tweet was made by Putin that voiced his support for Rowling's fight against cancel culture when he said "JK Rowling was cancelled because she, a writer of books that have sold millions of copies around the world, didn't please fans of so-called gender

freedoms," (BBC News, 2022). Despite Rowling's Twitter response that calls Putin a "slaughterer" and cites her support of Ukraine over Russia (Harrison, 2022), this is an important example of how negative attitudes can empower those who share the same bigoted views and used as an incentive to cause harm.

The following quotation considers how wilful ignorance is employed by those who do not face the immediate negative consequences of bigotry and transforms into more than just ignorance, but a purposeful stance against those who would ask for change and acceptance:

The complaint that trans rights has become a hegemonic ideological institution armed with the power of the state allows transphobic rhetoric to employ a narrative of victimization in line with the ongoing mobilization of fictions of white female vulnerability to justify violence against marginalized groups. [...] the transgender spectre proves too useful a tool around which white women academics can position their fictional victimhood. Ignorance is not just bliss – it is useful, deliberate, and violent. (Horbury and Yao, 2020, p.1)

Here, it is discussed how white feminists, who do not face bigotry or discrimination outside of sexism (which is not to say they do not suffer, but there is little intersection that causes them to suffer further bias), use the growing acceptance of transgender rights to paint themselves as the victim. Rowling uses the "death threats" from trans-activists who tell her she is "killing transgender youth with her words" (Rowling, 2020) to manufacture sympathy for herself, freeing herself from the implicature that her words could ever have caused any of the 51% of trans youth who have reported suicide ideation (Adams et al, 2017). Horbury and Yao's research explores how in recent history there has been an influx of anti-trans 'feminist' academia from the UK from 2019 and onwards. An example of this anti-trans 'feminist' academia is that the senate House Library hosted a Rights for Women exhibition featuring Gender Hurts (Jeffrys, 2014) a manifesto exploring the dangers of trans people to women's rights which feeds into this position of victimisation that Horbury and Yao claim white women academics compose for themselves. This theme of false victimisation is also echoed into the All-Lives

Matter movement that came as a response to the Black Lives Matter and the Capitol Hill riots in the US proceeding Biden's inauguration in 2021. All these groups have been made up of people who hold power that stands to be taken away if minority groups are given the human rights that should never have been questioned, and each uses the tactics discussed by Horbury and Yao to gain sympathy and popularity. It is argued that the continual growing of capitalism has engendered more ways for marginalised groups of society to be exploited, Ozbilgin and Ervil (2021) explore how the #metoo movement revealed a "morally conspicuous pecking order between [gender and race] [...] white women's interests were better represented as race issues became almost invisible." (p.122). This supports the claims of Horbury and Yao in showing that groups of people who hold social power will always seek to make social justice movement work best for them. Even in a situation like the #metoo movement, where the focus is on women, who are a minority group; people who fit into more than one minority group are marginalised. These are often the people that need to most help. Ozbilgin and Ervil (2021) explore this notion further when assessing notions of "white pride" in which it is questioned how concerned with wellbeing and welfare one actually is if they are campaigning for the wellbeing of one group while still pertaining to discriminatory and exclusionary practices, "in fact, such single-agenda social movements could render many forms of injustice, inequality and exploitation invisible in societies and workplaces." (p. 126). The same exclusionary behaviour can be seen across many social justice movements, as such it is a principal factor to keep in mind when exploring such an intersectional topic.

This continuation of exclusionary groups is not simply a problem in English speaking countries, this resistance toward accepting gender neutral language and practices is a global concern. Satako (2020) has carried out research on how anti-trans feminism has become more common in the Japanese twitter-sphere. In this research, the biological essentialist belief system is identified as the core driving force to these radical 'feminists.' This biological essentialism states that the sex you are assigned at birth is the one that you have forever, gender is recognised as a social construct that should be ignored completely. Satako outlines how it is not scientifically possible to prove that male to female trans

women are stronger than cis gendered females and therefore should not face scrutiny in sport settings and calls for trans exclusionary radical feminists to “dismantle the oppressive regime of the gender binary, biological determinism, and heteropatriarchy: not because of sameness but despite all differences.” (p. 23)

The following section explores research pertaining to colonialism. This may be a beneficial area of research to use to offer some explanation to the origin of such resistance toward language change. An exploration of how imperial history is slanted towards a British mindset and how colonisation forced imperial cultures to view gender differently highlights how the way people view binary genders in modern day society is not only cultivated by sexism but also inherent racism. It is incredibly interesting to explore how distinct cultures across the world view gender, and it is also very telling to see how white colonisers demonised those cultures as a way of oppression and control.

White American scientists such as Charles Hughs (1893) who compared drag balls to psychotic sexual perversion (Stein, 2015), have historically demonised other races, following polygeny they used pseudoscience to point out the differences in different races to justify denying political rights to Black and Indigenous people. This led to the view that white people should reproduce more to ensure the dominance of the race which then led to many people holding the view that homosexuality was a sign of degeneracy (Somerville, 2000). This dominance of race can be traced into the balance of personal desire and regulation, as explored by Curtis-Wendlant (2011). Curtis-Wendlant analyses letters sent between a betrothed couple as the man is away fighting for Australian colonies. This research explores how the letters show an element of wifely duty on the woman's part, echoing the view that white heterosexual couples believed it to be their duty to reproduce and ensure the dominance of the race. This contextualisation draws more attention to how the context of attitudes affects the way people act.

It was Black feminists that drew the important connections between race, class, and gender in the 1980s. Feeling marginalised and silenced by white, middleclass women who failed to recognise the

needs of women in different socioeconomic circles, Black women used civil right protests to draw comparisons between the way women are treated in society and the way men are treated (Hartman, 1998). The divide in white feminists and minority group feminists, is a clear side effect of the years of colonial gender norms and racism.

Lupez and Bucholtz (2017) observe that much of queer theory and queer linguistics observe predominantly white discourse in their research. They cite works such as Morrish and Sauntson (2007) which elevates the concept of Butch and Femme to be disruptive of heteronormative standards. While moving away from viewing “lesbian genders” as a mimic of heterosexuality and instead viewing it as its own thing is a key step in re-conceptualising the hegemonic discourse that queer theory seeks to question, Lupez and Bucholtz (2017) seek to explore how black queer language offers another realm of intersectionality that must be understood in order to move forward. In the history of research into black gender and sexuality, Lupez and Bucholtz observe that this has been of a predominantly heterosexual focus as the multitude of intersectionality causes the topic to be isolated. With this in mind, it is interesting to assess how far race is found to be a determinant factor that affects the general attitude toward using gender neutral language to refer to non-binary individuals.

2.5 PRESCRIPTIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD GENDERED PRONOUNS

A common explanation of why one may struggle to use They/Them pronouns is because it is not considered to be standard English grammar. It therefore reflects a prescriptivist attitude. Prescriptivism is a belief that all language should be standardised; it is an elitist model of language use that is largely rejected by most modern-day linguists. While standardisation is important to be able to share a language and teach new learners, some linguists such as Crystal (a linguist that celebrates descriptive attitudes to language) celebrates the way language change enriches a language and educates the listener – whether that language is standardised or colloquial. Crystal’s research into the text speak phenomenon is taught on the English Syllabus for GCSE students. Crystal (2009) assessed

the debate over youths being 'too lazy' to type full words and not having a proper understanding of how to use language correctly, and questions what a proper use of language is. This is the centre of the debate between prescriptivism and descriptivism; there can never be a clear binary answer to what 'proper language use' is because language is always evolving and one standard for language use quickly becomes outdated.

Another notable example of research conducted in this field is the work of Bradley et al (2019) who created a study on how people rated the 'grammatical correctness' of sentences with a variation of pronouns including 'they and them', and 'zi and zir', the result being participants were generally more accepting of the use of singular they/them pronouns when the gender of the subject was unclear. When it is made clear that the gender of the subject is non-binary, participants were less likely to see the use of those pronouns as grammatically correct. This suggests that there is an element of transphobia present in the way that the participants of this study assess grammar. In 2020, Bradley expanded on this to encapsulate how research-based education on inclusive language use is far more affective. This is because knowing the way in which general society view certain language use makes it clear what kind of education is required. In line with such results as this, it is prudent to consult literature on the monolingual habitus (Flynn, 2013 in Cunningham 2018). The monolingual habitus is the term that identifies a society that gives privilege to speakers of a singular language. The UK is one such society wherein fluent speakers of the English language receive more privilege over multi-lingual speakers who do not have a high-level grasp of English; people may even be discriminated against in a monolingual habitus because of the presence of a heavy accent from a non-English speaking country. Knowing this, it is interesting to see how countries that a monolingual habitus is not present, such as Sweden, which harbours more accepting attitudes toward changing attitudes toward use of they/them pronouns as seen in the research of Gustafsson Seden et al (2015) which saw an increase of "fair language use" and identified time as a factor that improves attitudes to non-binary identities after a study that spanned multiple years and saw that participants became more accepting to they/them pronouns when they had been in popular use for multiple years. This speaks to

Cameron's Verbal Hygiene (2005) which proposes that humans will always want to question and change the way that we use language. Cameron argues that prescriptivism holds back this sense of language change and hinders the natural evolution of our language. Cameron uses the example of builder's adapted language of using one-word exclamations like 'slab' to demonstrate how language needs to be adapted for certain things; prescriptivism demonises this by criticising the lack of full sentences. In other words, prescriptivist arguments fail to recognise the diversity of language users' needs.

Code-switching is an example of how language can adapt to share experiences and is often met with negative attitudes especially in a monolingual habitus. Research on the use of code-switching between bilingual English-Spanish speakers has been carried out by Gutierrez-Rivas. Code-switching is common even in different cities where regional language has different words for different things. The study explores how in an interview setting, a participant of whom has a second language of Spanish remained speaking in Spanish as opposed to switching to English or Spanglish, because the interviewer was solely speaking Spanish. Gutierrez-Rivas identifies this as "following the leader" (Gutierrez-Rivas, 2006). Taking this into consideration when exploring how people use of language in relation to non-binary individuals, it is interesting to apply this theory of following the leader to the way in which people form incorrect assumptions about what is and is not grammatically correct; people do not want to switch how they use their language because being grammatically correct is seen as an academic quality and therefor brings a more powerful presence to the speaker. It is then jarring to learn that they/them as a singular pronoun has been in recorded use since as early as 1375 (OED, 2018). In this lies the true issue with prescriptivism in which those who set out to follow in a prescriptivist linguistic practice often find themselves cherry-picking the rules that they should follow in line with the most influential and powerful literature. But influential and powerful is not representative of the whole and, as discussed in Cameron (2005) above, does not reflect the needs of the wider language-user.

In conclusion, all the research discussed here covers themes of power, oppression, intersectionality and diversity. These themes are important to consider when answering the research questions put forward in this thesis. The literature draws a clear correlation between factors of gender and sexuality, and attitudes to gender neutral pronouns. It also clearly outlines how at the time that this thesis was being written, the overall attitude to language change to accommodate gender neutral language was negative with many online and public spaces including governing bodies exhibit transphobic behaviour that can endanger the lives of people who are part of the transgender community.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this research study was to investigate the general level of knowledge regarding gender-neutral pronoun usage and to explore the factors that may influence individuals' opinions on the matter. To achieve this objective, participants were surveyed on various demographic factors such as age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. Participants were asked to describe these factors in their own words, providing complete inclusivity to avoid any "othering" of groups. Additionally, this approach offered an opportunity to examine how diverse individuals' identities are and how different groups, often labelled as "male" or "female," may be described differently depending on personality and political stances. These categories were selected after careful consideration of what factors commonly influence a person's personal experience in society. Due to the scope of this study, it was expected that two or three factors would be selected for more in-depth analysis, depending on the diversity of survey responses. Using a survey for data collection was a choice made under the circumstances of the pandemic that prevented in-person data collection at the time. A survey provided a way to collect data of a wide range of individuals without implicating any safety risks.

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this study were required to be over 18 years of age and consent to the use of their data for research purposes. The survey was open to all individuals, and participation remained an anonymous

to ensure that participants felt safe in sharing their opinions and experiences without fear of retribution. The study aimed to recruit at least 100 participants for a small-scale investigation into attitudes toward gender-neutral language. However, due to the anonymity and distribution of the survey, the participants were not representative of any specific region or social class. The lack of specificity was advantageous as it demonstrated that non-binary individuals can never be sure of the attitude of any new person they meet when asking for gender-neutral language use which can be distressing and even dangerous in certain contexts.

3.2 SURVEY

Qualtrics was used to create the survey due to its user-friendly interface and flexible question style.

The survey consisted of three sections:

Section A -

This section assessed the level of knowledge held by each participant. It was important to know whether the respondents were aware of the topic at hand to ensure they could respond appropriately to the questions in section B. The survey recorded their initial response, and in cases where participants showed a lack of knowledge, provided definitions of terms such as "pronoun" and "non-binary" before moving on to the next question. The level of the participant's knowledge of these terms is measured by the answers "yes", "no" or "unsure" wherein the latter two responses would trigger the survey to provide the definitions so that the later questions can make sense to the participant. Measuring their initial knowledge was intended to provide context for the interpretation of the survey responses wherein if many participants who were exhibiting negative opinions toward the use of singular "they" and "them" pronouns, it would then open for the conclusion that it is lack of knowledge that causes negative opinions.

Section B -

The aim of this section was to measure participants' tolerance for using gender-neutral language. Participants were asked how likely they would be to change the way they use pronouns to refer to a person based on their closeness to the person. This section included questions about acquaintances, friends/partners, and family members. These closeness indicators were chosen with the understanding that family is the closest but also the one with the most possible complications – it is often seen throughout media platforms that a parent may be generally accepting of different sexualities but find it different when it is their own child coming out as it challenges their pre-existing notions of their future. Friends and partners were listed as the second closest connection and viewed as existing without the complications that family has. Lastly, acquaintances accounts for someone the participant barely knows or just met, because this option doesn't include the complexities of a personal connection to the subject in the way family would, it frees the participant of personal connection and would either make it easier or harder to change the language they use; if you have only ever used one set of words to refer to someone some may argue that this is easier as no change is necessary which can be used to highlight the participant's base level of acceptance as if this level of closeness holds the least amount of contextual complications and therefore could reflect their true feelings on the matter. Furthermore, allowing the participants space to consider how likely they are to change their language if they are requested to do so depending on the closeness that they feel to the subject, also allows space for explanation and therefore more data that can be linguistically explored.

Section C -

Images are used in this section. The images were obtained by searching for "copyright-free images of "man," "woman," "trans man," "trans woman," and "non-binary". The images were chosen at depending on whichever image appeared as the first result after searching which is why each image is presented in a different style. It did not seem necessary for each image to be presented in a consistent style as it was meant to reflect a snap-shot judgement.

Participants were asked to identify the pronouns they would use to refer to each image and to explain why they chose the option they did. Using visuals was an effective way of gathering data as it averted potential interference from varying standards of what constitutes "masculine" or "feminine." Verbal descriptions suggesting a set of pronouns would have relied too heavily on the reader's imagination, whereas the images gave every respondent the same stimuli and therefore provided more reliable results.

The fact that the images presented differ in style also reflects how the different genders that were entered into the search bar are generally presented to the public. It was also pointed out prior to the data being collected that there is no racial diversity across the images that were selected. Upon reflection, there should have been some diversity however the very fact that these were the top image on these searches shows how much this issue has been whitewashed across society and it is important to be aware of how intersectionality intensifies the struggles and dangers that non-binary people face.

Once Qualtrics had been used to collect and summarise the data, Excel was the tool used to present the results. Data summarisations provided by Qualtrics were input into Excel spreadsheets to create bar charts that demonstrated percentages and averages representing the survey results.

3.3 METHOD OF PROCEDURE

The survey was initially distributed through workplace emails. The intention was to contact York-based companies such as Arriva and Nestle due to their status as some of the largest employers in the city of York, along with emailing students and faculty at York St John University. The aim was to gain a controlled but diverse sample of data. However, the link was also circulated in social media feeds with no restriction placed upon the link to the survey, which meant that once it had been shared, there was no way of tracking where any one participant was located. This was necessary for anonymity but also meant that this data could not be specifically traced back to any one geographical location. Though this meant that the data for the survey lacked specificity, the aim of this research was still met by providing a representation of many different attitudes given by over 2000 participants.

3.4 ANALYSIS METHODS

Quantitative analysis was the preliminary form of analysis of the data. As the data covered a wide range of intersecting factors, these statistics could not be considered a reliable indication of attitudes on a whole. However, they provided a useful overview of the general groups of identities present within the data. Despite the intersecting factors impeding on the authenticity of how far each identity and factor was responsible for the attitudes displayed, it offered important insight into the data results.

For the qualitative portion of the analysis, a sociolinguistic approach was employed, putting emphasis on the cultural context of the language used. Bearing in mind that “sociolinguists also have tended to assume that native speakers possess a set of social rules in their minds; these social rules can then be discovered and taught to non-native speakers (Kasper and Dhal, 1991),” (Davis, 1995, p.430), the research focused on discovering how the participants displayed their attitudes toward gender-neutral language using a sociolinguist approach. This revealed if there were underlying rules to this language present within the data set, which could be challenged and changed to improve any negative opinions. In addition to considering the cultural context of the results, in-depth linguistic analysis pertaining to linguistic patterns and modal patterns was utilized. The primary method for this analysis used the five building tasks of discourse analysis put forward by Gee (2014): Significance, practices, identities, relationships, and politics. Gee explained that idea discourse analysis should evaluate how situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, and intertextuality were used by the speaker to create and destroy each of these building tasks (Gee, 2014, p. 140). These five building tasks of discourse analysis were used to influence which sections of data were chosen for discussion; data that reflected one or more of these tasks was chosen for its relevance to the research question.

Another approach to sociolinguistic research that has influenced the analysis of the data in this thesis is Milroy and Gordon’s (2003) description of current sociolinguistic approaches. Milroy and Gordon (2003) provide an overview of sociolinguistic approaches to research, which involve the study of

language in relation to social factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity. The authors describe the quantitative and qualitative methods used in sociolinguistic research, including surveys, experiments, discourse analysis, and ethnography. They also discuss the importance of considering the social context in which language is used and the role of power in shaping linguistic practices. Additionally, Milroy and Gordon highlight the value of interdisciplinary collaboration in sociolinguistics, drawing on insights from fields such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Overall, their article emphasizes the complexity of language use and the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to understanding it.

The data that is analysed in the qualitative section of this thesis contains quotations from participant responses that reflect one or more of Gee's five building tasks. Linguistic patterns are identified to measure the tone of the participant responses. These are then contextualised based primarily on this researcher's personal experience. This unique positionality allows for the context-sensitive notions that are identified to be brought into speculation which allows for a conclusion to be brought forth that reflects how the language used by the participants can be perceived through the lens of a non-binary person such as myself.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected for this research project comprises a total of 2107 survey responses. Although the initial goal was to gather 100 participants, a significant amount of data had to be excluded from the analysis due to the limited scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, the high response rate to the survey underscores the salience of gender-neutral language, as many individuals are passionate about the topic.

The survey was designed to be inclusive and allow participants to express their opinions in as much or as little detail as they wished. As a result, the diverse responses provide insights into the factors presented within the dataset, as well as how different groups of people choose to present themselves. However, it should be noted that this approach also posed challenges in grouping certain identities fairly. Consequently, questions relating to the factors of religion and ethnicity have not been included in the data analysis.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the grouping of gender and sexuality factors could potentially yield slightly different results if the analysis were conducted in a different order. Despite this caveat, the data presented below offers a compelling perspective on how the analyzed factors intersect.

4.1 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The quantitative results provide insights into the various groups represented within the dataset and their level of acceptance towards gender-neutral language. This section of the research presents the survey results visually as graphs.

Section A of the questionnaire aims to gauge the participants' level of knowledge and awareness of the gender and pronoun topic. It is noteworthy that all participants reported understanding the terms "pronouns" and "non-binary." As outlined in the methodology section, participants who indicated a lack of understanding were provided with a brief definition of the term and were advised not to change their initial response. This approach ensured that every participant had a basic understanding of the topic as they progressed to sections B and C. However, the initial level of knowledge reported by each participant is included in this research to provide an overview of the prevalence of awareness and understanding of the topic.

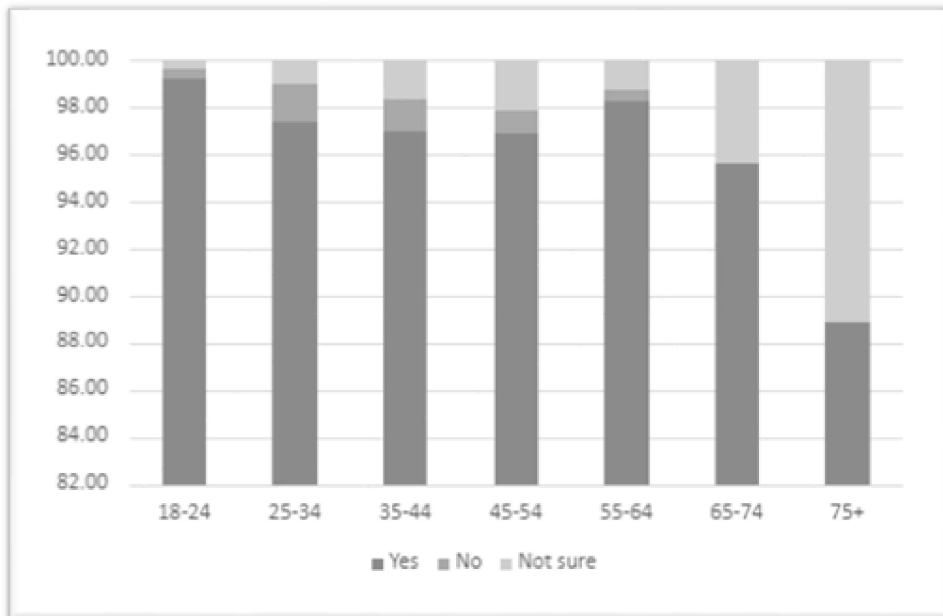


Figure 1: Percentages of each age group's reported knowledge of pronouns

Age is the factor that displays the most consistent data variation among all factors evaluated in the survey. Very few responses indicated that they were unfamiliar with the term "nonbinary." The graph above shows that only 15% of participants aged over 65 reported being unsure of what a pronoun is, while all other age groups demonstrated a 90% awareness of the term. The findings indicate that over 85% of all survey participants understand the linguistic concept of a pronoun, thereby establishing that the survey questions were comprehensible to each respondent, and no new concepts were introduced.

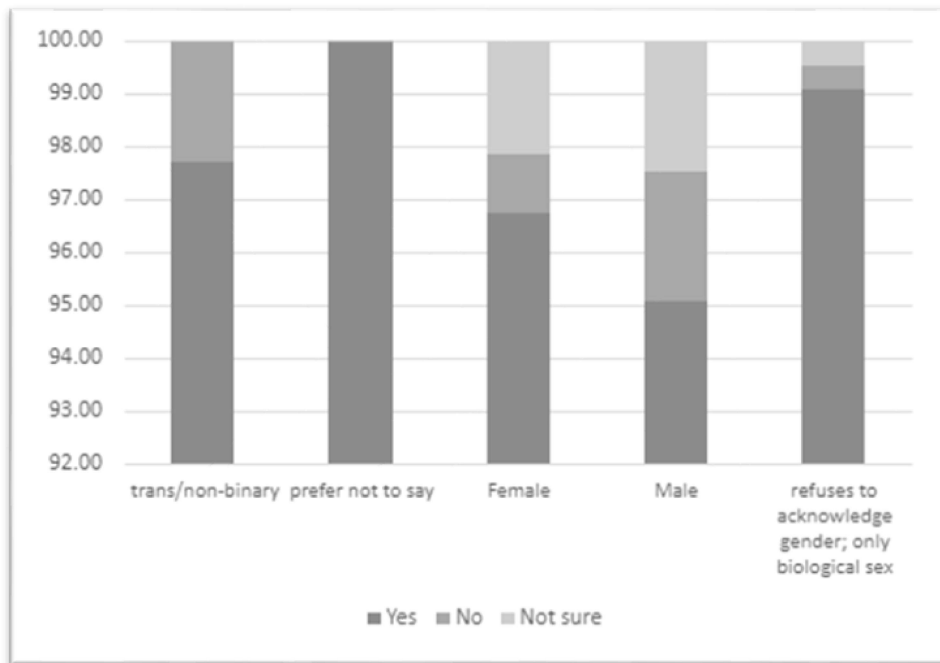


Figure 2: Percentages of each gender group's reported knowledge of pronouns

The data depicted in Figure 2 confirms the outcomes presented in Figure 1. The results reveal that over 95% of participants in each gender group possessed prior knowledge of the definition of a pronoun. Of all gender groups, male participants exhibited the lowest percentage of individuals with pre-existing awareness of pronouns. Given the small number of male-identifying participants in the survey, this factor appeared to have a significant impact on participants' level of knowledge. Conversely, the group of participants who rejected gender as an identity and identified solely with their biological sex displayed the second-highest percentage (99%) of respondents with an understanding of pronouns. Notably, all participants who preferred not to disclose their gender identity reported comprehending the meaning of a pronoun. It is plausible that some overlap may exist between these groups, and it should be noted that the cohort of participants who declined to reveal their gender identity was considerably smaller than the group who rejected gender identity altogether. As a result, other variables may have influenced the results displayed in Figure 2.

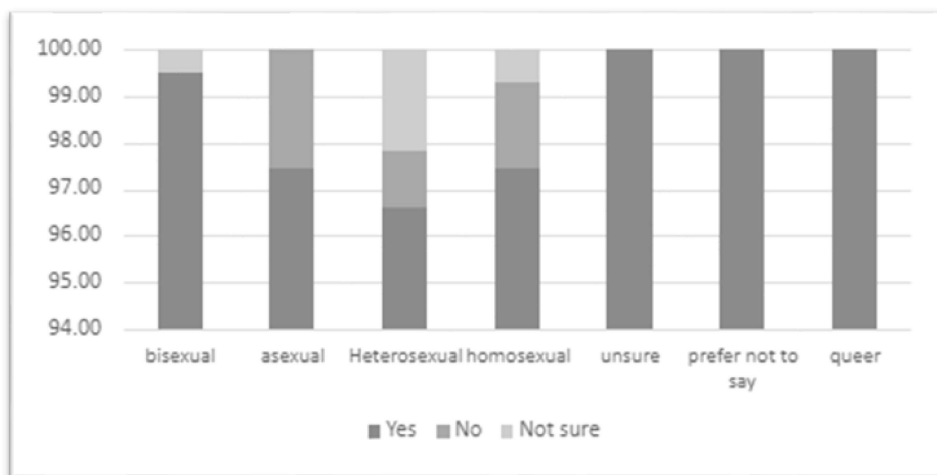


Figure 3: Percentages of each sexuality groups' reported knowledge of pronouns

The presented data in Figure 3 reveals a level of consistency similar to that seen in Figure 2. The lowest percentage of participants that reported not knowing what a pronoun is, at 2.56%, belonged to the asexual group. Additionally, the data shows that the 3.38% of heterosexual participants who reported not knowing or being unsure about pronouns were the group with the least amount of understanding. However, these results are negligible as at least 97% of every sexuality group answered positively to the question, indicating that sexuality has minimal influence on the pre-existing understanding of pronouns held by participants in this study.

In Section B, the study examines the level of willingness among participants to incorporate gender-neutral language, specifically They/them pronouns, into their language use. The results are presented as averages based on the likelihood that participants would be accepting of gender-neutral language, rather than percentages. As outlined in Section 3.0, each level of acceptance was assigned a numerical value ranging from 1 (least accepting) to 7 (most accepting). Standard deviation lines are depicted at the top of the bar to provide an indication of the spread of results within each group of participants. Notably, the data reveals minimal variation in a participant's willingness to alter their language use when it comes to

acquaintances, family, or close friends. Therefore, this analysis focuses on the results concerning close friends and family members.

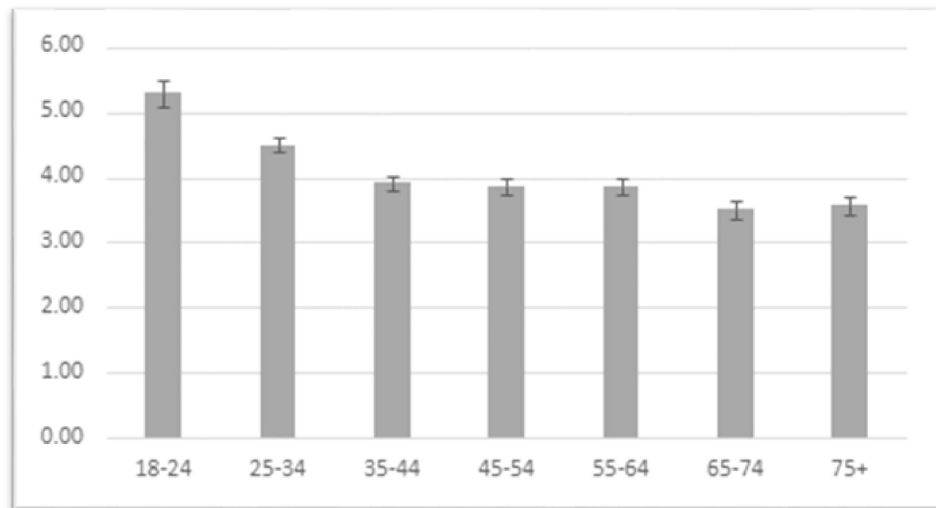


Figure 4: Average likelihood of different age groups reporting the use of *They/Them* pronouns for a close friend or partner

Figure 4 illustrates how age influences the participants' willingness to incorporate *They/Them* pronouns into their language use for a close friend or partner. The data indicates a gradual decrease in the average level of willingness as the age groups increase. The youngest age group shows the highest likelihood of using gender-neutral pronouns with an average of 5.3. In contrast, the middle-aged groups of 35-64 all share an average of 3.9. Similarly, the older age groups show similar results, with a marginal difference between them. The participants aged 75+ display slightly more acceptance with an average of 3.57, while the average for those aged 65-74 is 3.51. However, this slight variation is due to the smaller size of the 75+ age group compared to the one above. In summary, the findings indicate that the participants in this study are less inclined to use gender-neutral pronouns, the older they are.

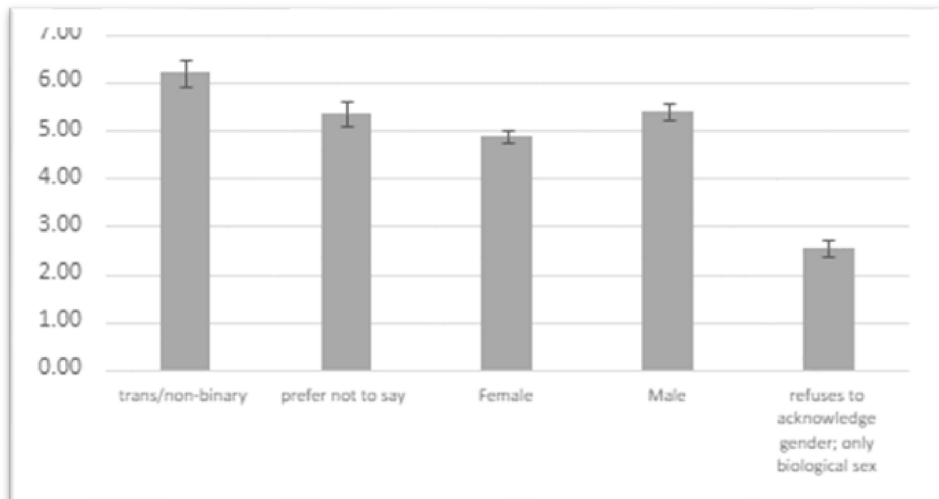


Figure 5: Average likelihood of each gender group reporting the use of *They/Them* pronouns to refer to a close friend or partner

Figure 5 illustrates that individuals who solely recognize biological sex, rather than gender, are the least likely among all groups to be willing to modify their language use to be more gender-neutral, with an average of 2.55, representing the lowest average across all results. This indicates that gender is a crucial factor in shaping participants' attitudes towards this issue. Conversely, those who identify as non-binary or transgender are the most likely group to accept gender-neutral language, with an average of 6.19. This may be due to the fact that this group of individuals is more likely to use such language themselves and would find it natural to adjust their language to accommodate a close friend or partner, just as those individuals would accommodate them. However, it is essential to note that some responses provided additional explanations in the optional open text section, stating that even though they use these pronouns for themselves, it can be challenging to transition. This is further discussed in the qualitative section of this research. Furthermore, the data reveals that male respondents are more accepting than female respondents, with males averaging 5.4 and females averaging 4.8. This difference of 0.6 may be attributed to the fact that the number of

male participants is lower than that of female participants, allowing for other factors, such as sexuality, to influence the female results.

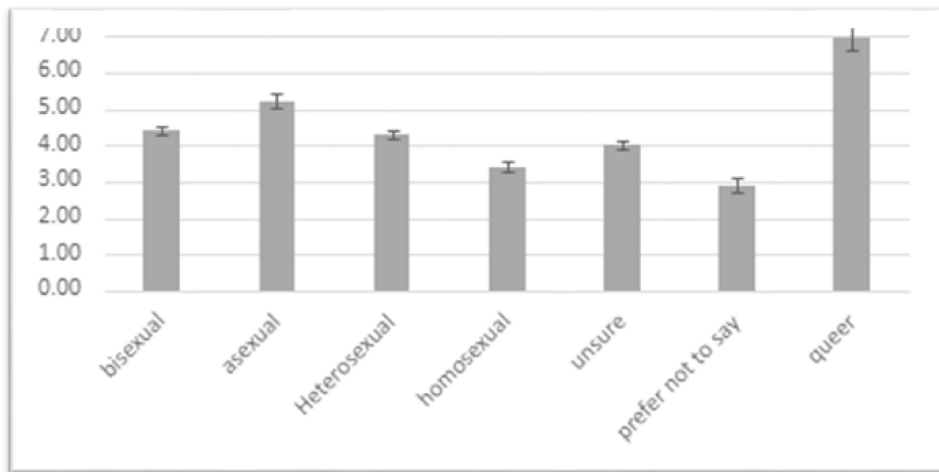


Figure 6: Average likelihood for each sexuality group reporting the use of *They/Them* pronouns for a close friend or partner

Figure 6 reveals that individuals who identify as 'queer' are considerably more likely than any other sexuality group to be open to altering their language use to include *They/Them* pronouns for a close friend or partner if requested. The group least receptive to this language adjustment is those who declined to disclose their sexuality, with an average of 2.9. Nevertheless, this group is comparatively small when compared to the group of participants who are the second least likely to embrace the change in language use. This group identifies as homosexual, with an average of 3.4. The marginal 0.5-unit difference is attributable to the fact that these participants are among the group of people who declined to provide a gender identity, as demonstrated in Figure 4. Though participants were encouraged to respond candidly to each question, there could be several reasons why these results emerged. These reasons, along with their implications, are scrutinized in Section 4.2 through qualitative analysis of the open-text responses.

Section C utilized visual components to assess participants' perceptions of gender. The results are presented in the following graphs in reaction to an image obtained by searching for a "copyright image of a male" as shown in Figure 7. This research method is complementary to the research method used in section B, as it demonstrates how participants' opinions are reflected in practice. Although one group may believe it is easy to adapt their language in theory, stereotypes about a person's gender based on their appearance still exist. This section will primarily focus on the quantifiable data, but interesting conclusions can be drawn from the explanations provided by some participants, which will be explored in a later section of the analysis. The data is presented in percentages, similar to section A. Two sets of questions will be analysed in this section of the research, with the goal of providing data for images that are of a stereotypically presented cis-gender person and someone who is presenting a mixture of stereotypically masculine and feminine features. This analysis will highlight how various factors may influence how participants consciously or subconsciously experience gender. The context that section C provides on how people assume gender will provide valuable insights on how the factors intersect with each other in a "real-world" setting.

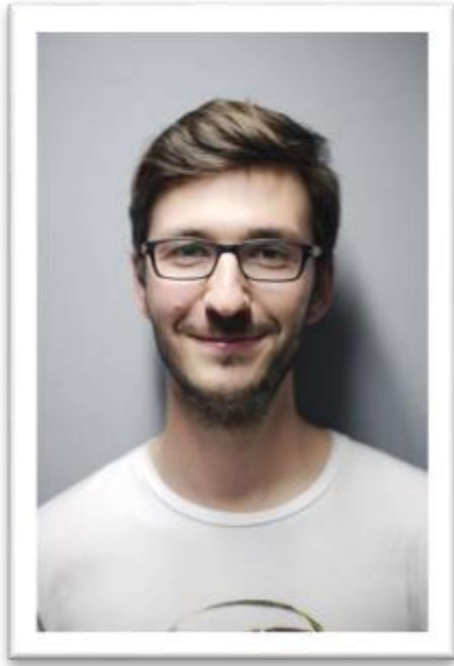


Figure 7: Image showing headshot of a cis-gender male model with short hair, glasses, and facial hair

This image was selected because it displays features that are conventionally associated with masculinity such as short hair, facial hair, and a flat chest. It was presented as the initial image to participants, as a starting point to ease into the exercise. However, the somewhat diverse range of responses it elicited was unexpected.

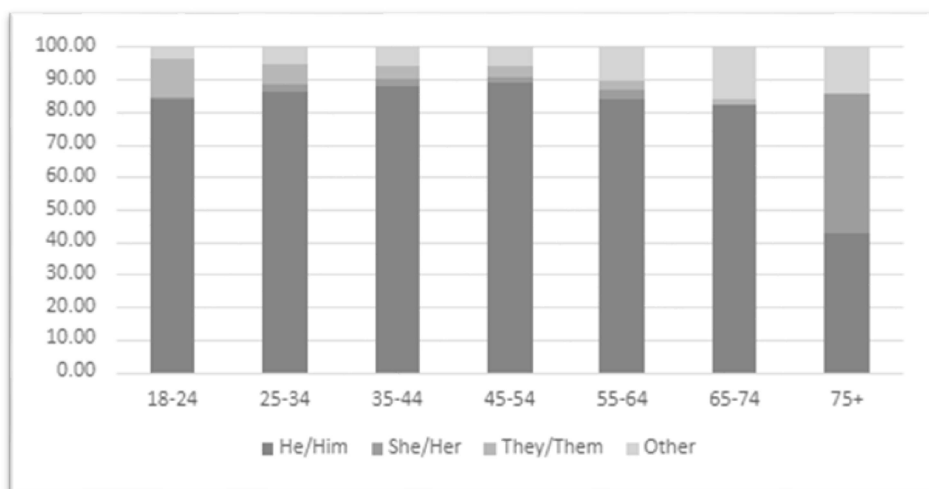


Figure 8: Percentage of each age group's pronoun choice to describe figure 7

The diverse outcomes displayed for participants aged over 75 can be rationalized by the relatively small sample size of this group. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the results illustrate a significant divergence, indicating that other factors beyond age impact how individuals perceive gender. The largest proportion of participants, regardless of age, opted for He/Him pronouns in response to the image, with the most uniform selection being made by participants aged 45-54, of whom 88.92% favoured this choice.

There is noticeable variation in the responses of all age groups, with the exception of the over 75's group, suggesting that there are multiple factors at play in influencing one's perception of gender. Among all age groups, He/Him was the most common response, with 88.92% of 45–54-year-olds selecting this option. The 65-74 age group had the lowest percentage of He/Him responses at 81.97%, followed closely by the 18-24 age group at 83.86%. Notably, the 18-24 age group had the second highest percentage of participants, at 12%, indicating that they would use They/Them pronouns. Conversely, 16.39% of the 65-74 age group indicated that they would use pronouns other than He/Him or They/Them to refer to the person in the image. Analysis of the open text responses suggests that many participants are hesitant to gender a person at all, with some indicating a preference to avoid pronouns until more information about the person is available, such as their name or voice. The implications of these findings will be discussed in greater detail in section 4.2.

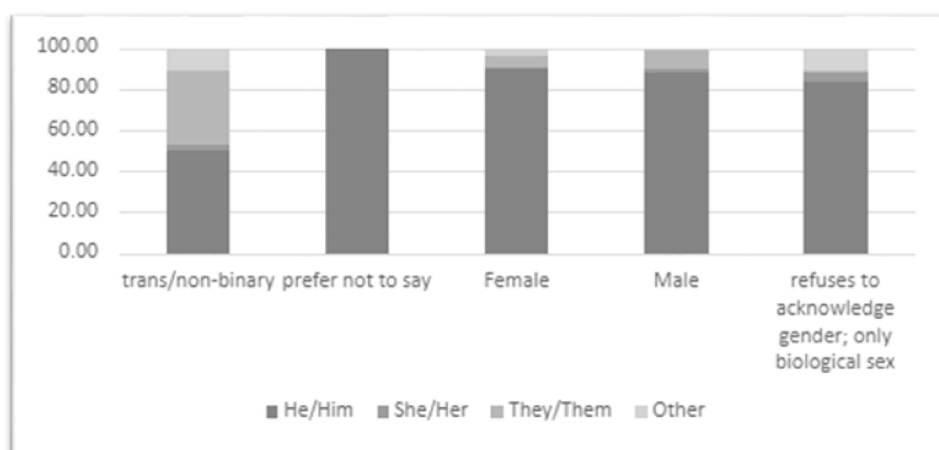


Figure 9: Percentages of each gender group's pronouns choice to describe figure 7

The theory posited regarding the meaning of the *Other* category in the survey is substantiated by the findings presented in figure 9. The group of participants who opted not to acknowledge gender exhibit a response rate of 10% for *Other*, which is surpassed by the cohort identifying as trans or non-binary, with an 11% response rate. This dichotomy encapsulates the two divergent perspectives, with one group influenced by their apprehension toward the unknown and hence preferring to use names or withhold gendered references until more information is obtained, and the other group being cognizant of the potential offense caused by assuming someone's gender and hence being more circumspect in their use of pronouns.

The 50% of trans/non-binary respondents manifest the lowest percentage of He/Him selections, while concurrently exhibiting the highest proportion of They/Them responses, at 35%. This represents the largest percentage of They/Them pronoun usage, and reinforces the disparity between the attitudes underpinning the *Other* category, wherein trans/non-binary individuals are more inclined to eschew pronoun usage entirely until informed of their interlocutors' preferred pronouns, as an act of respect for their self-identification. Conversely, those who reject the acknowledgement of gender are only tentative in their use of pronouns until further information is available, indicative of a more negative stance towards They/Them pronouns.

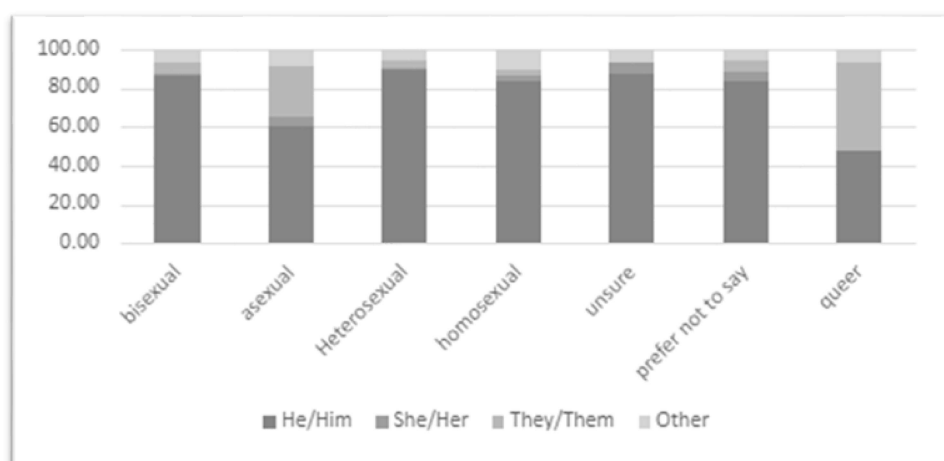


Figure 10: Percentages of each sexuality group's pronouns choice to describe figure 7

Figure 10 presents an intriguing result that sets it apart from all other responses to this question. The bisexual participants' high response rate of 86% for He/Him is particularly noteworthy when compared to the asexual (60%) and queer (48.28%) groups. This finding corroborates previous analyses of results, which demonstrate the considerable difference between the responses of homosexual and queer participants. Given the similarity between the responses of bisexual and homosexual participants, it is reasonable to assume that a substantial proportion of those who identify as bisexual also do not subscribe to any gender label. The results suggest that this is the most plausible explanation for the inconsistency observed in this group.

In contrast, 44.83% of queer-identifying participants indicated that they would use They/Them pronouns to refer to the person in figure 7. This finding supports the results of section B, which indicate that those who identify as queer are more likely to use gender-neutral language. While a person's gender may influence this trend, the results show that a higher percentage of queer-identifying participants prefer to use They/Them pronouns to refer to figure 7 than the percentage displayed by trans/non-binary participants for the same image. Therefore, it can be inferred that sexuality may have a greater impact than gender on a person's inclination to use gender-neutral pronouns, with a high level of acceptance for They/Them as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun.



Figure 11: Image of a MTF trans woman with long hair, posed in a foetal position, wearing high heels and a skirt

Figure 11 was obtained by selecting an image of a transgender woman who has not undergone gender-affirming surgery. This image is interesting as it does not display any overtly feminine physical features. The silhouette is not discernible, and the chest is hidden by the model's posture. Instead, the model's gender presentation relies on stereotypically feminine features such as high-heeled shoes, a skirt, and long hair. As such, the visual aspect of this question provides a perspective that illustrates how gender recognition is not solely reliant upon social norms surrounding style and presentation, but rather on other factors. The results of this question were found to be much more varied than those of the previous question, which featured a cisgender male model.

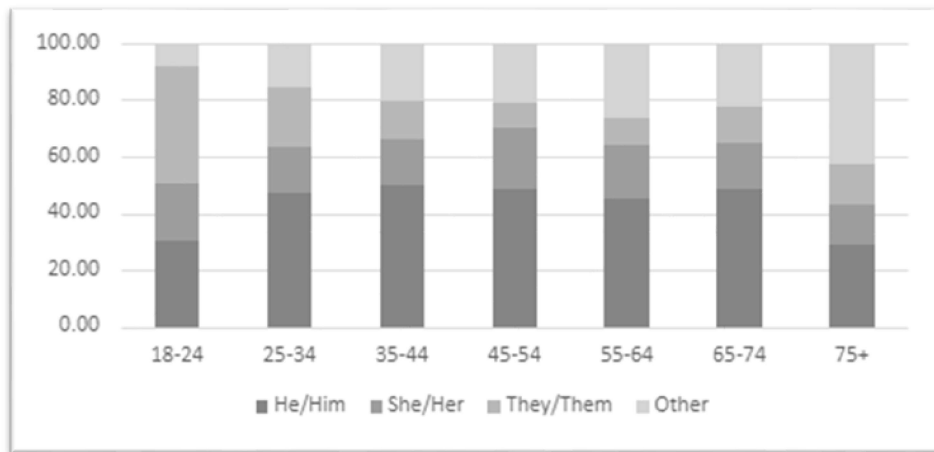


Figure 12: Percentages of each age group's pronouns choice to describe figure 11

The results from Figure 12 suggest that the gender presentation of the model plays a significant role in how participants choose to use pronouns. The highest percentage for every age group is not the pronouns that align with the stereotypical gender presentation, which is she/her in this case. Instead, the highest percentage varies depending on the age group, with the 35-44 age group having the highest percentage of he/him pronouns and the 45-54 age group having the highest percentage of she/her pronouns. Interestingly, the oldest age group (75 and over) has the highest percentage of selecting "Other" to describe the pronouns they would use to refer to the model. This suggests that older age does not necessarily mean that a person will presume biological sex over gender presentation.

Furthermore, the results show that the youngest age group (18-24) is the most likely to use they/them pronouns, with 41.47% of participants in that group choosing that option. Many participants in this age group also admitted in their open-text response that they would read the model as biologically male but consider the stereotypically feminine presentation, which may explain why they err on the side of gender neutrality until further information is acquired. These results suggest that younger generations are more accepting of gender-neutral language and may be more likely to use it in their daily lives.

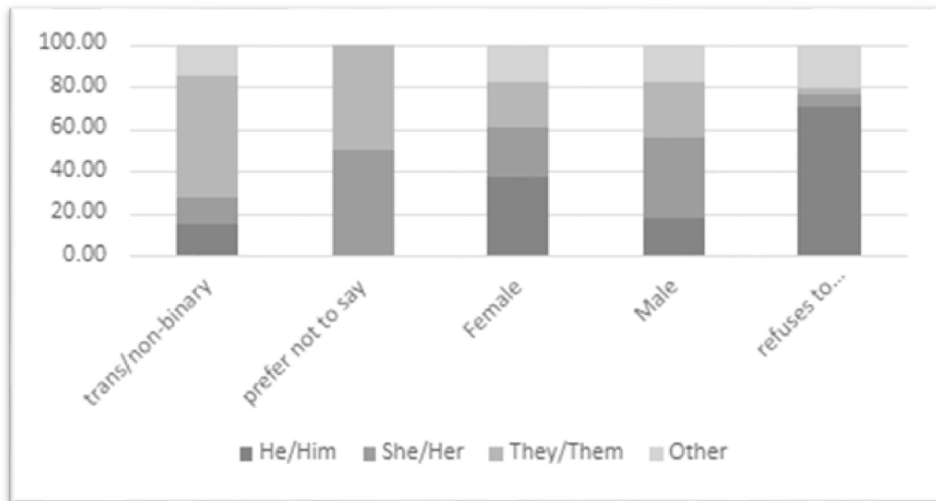


Figure 13: Percentages of each gender group's pronouns choice to describe figure 11

Figure 13 provides compelling data that mirrors the findings of the previously discussed results. Notably, the data shows a 50/50 split between she/her and they/them pronouns for participants who identified as preferring not to disclose their gender identity. Although this group is small and may not be fully representative of the wider population, it is intriguing that they did not choose He/Him or Other, in contrast to the varied results of Figure 7. The group that refused to provide their gender is also noteworthy, with 70% selecting He/Him pronouns to refer to the image in Figure 6. This group had the highest percentage of any group choosing He/Him pronouns. On the other hand, 57.89% of trans/non-binary participants selected They/Them pronouns. Excluding the group of participants who preferred not to disclose their gender, the largest percentage of participants who chose She/Her pronouns were those who identify as male (37.8%). However, this percentage is significantly smaller than the percentage of participants who refused to acknowledge gender and selected He/Him pronouns. These results suggest a strong inclination towards pronouns that correspond to biological sex, which implies that gender plays a critical role in attitudes towards singular they and them pronouns.

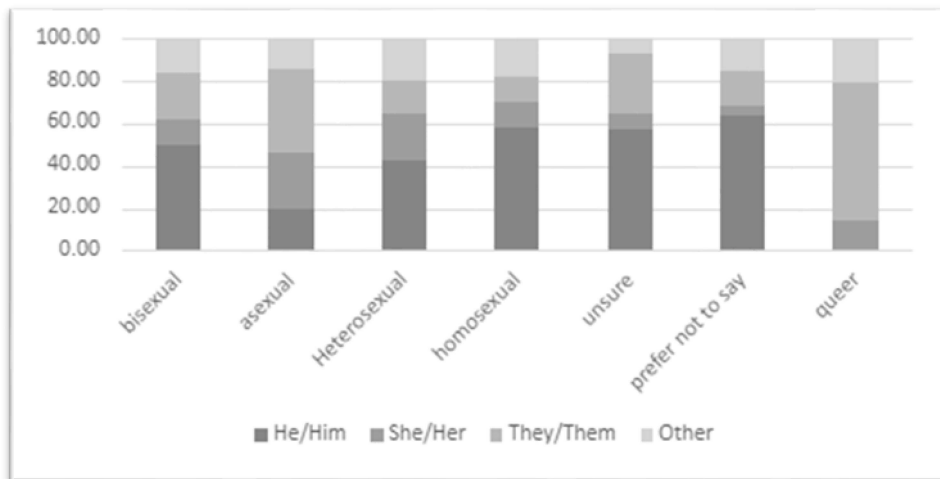


Figure 14: Percentages of each sexuality group's pronouns choice to describe figure 11

Figure 14 depicts data that reveals interesting patterns in the selection of pronouns among various identity groups. The group of participants who identified as queer displayed the highest percentage of selecting They/Them pronouns (65.52%) to describe the trans woman in the image. Notably, this group did not choose the pronoun set that aligns with the model's biological sex, indicating their acceptance of gender-neutral language and respect for the model's gender presentation. A similar trend was observed among participants who identified as asexual, with only 20% choosing He/Him pronouns - the second-lowest percentage across the graph. Among the other identity groups, the group of participants who identified as heterosexual had the lowest percentage of He/Him selections (42.12%). However, it is worth noting that this percentage is still relatively high given the model's gender presentation. On the other hand, the group that identified as homosexual had more than half (59%) selecting He/Him pronouns to refer to the model, which may be related to the gender identity of the participants rather than their sexuality. It is important to note that these findings do not necessarily represent broader societal attitudes towards gender-neutral language, but they do suggest that various identity groups may have different preferences when it comes to pronoun usage.

The overall result of this qualitative analysis indicates that factors such as gender and sexuality do have an influence on people's attitudes toward the use of they and them pronouns. While it is not as straightforward as saying that individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community are more

likely to be accepting of gender-neutral language and vice versa, this analysis clearly demonstrates that these factors do play a role in shaping attitudes.

Three additional images were included in the survey but have been excluded from this analysis to avoid repetitive data, as the figures presented above sufficiently demonstrate the attitudes of the participants. The linguistic analysis in the following section will delve deeper into the individual reactions to other images and provide greater insight into the perceived attitudes of the participants.

In the next section, qualitative analysis will be used to explore potential reasons for the quantitative results.

4.2 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS PART 1: CONTEXT

This section aims to provide additional context to the quantitative analysis by analysing open text responses through a sociolinguistic approach. By examining participants' comments in the survey and taking into account broader social and cultural contexts, this analysis seeks to shed light on the reasons behind the attitudes revealed in the collected data.

One notable finding in the quantitative analysis is that some participants identifying as non-binary or transgender reported difficulty in changing the language they use to refer to others, despite doing so for themselves. To explore this further, a specific quote focusing on the context of relationships will be analysed:

I think it would be harder to change pronoun usage for someone you have known for a long time.

Of all the responses implying a positive attitude toward changing pronouns, this quotation provides a perfect example of a middle-ground response. The participant indicates a willingness to try, but they acknowledge that breaking the habit would be hard. The use of “harder,” however, indicates that the participant will still try to break the habit and that it would come more naturally if they didn’t already have a preconceived notion of the gender identity of the individual in question. This is a common

occurrence for parents of LGBTQIA+ children when coming to terms with their child's identity. It is not that the parent is bigoted or no longer loves their child, but that their internal expectations of that person based on heteronormativity are challenged and they may need time to come to terms with this change before they can be fully accepting. Research shows that taking this time to re-evaluate one's own expectations of a person's gender when they come out to you increases how quickly you can change your language. This is because changing the language is only the first step; you must also change your mindset instead of reciting words that don't mean anything to you (Owens-Reid & Russo, 2014).

This particular response does not help to answer the question of whether factors of gender and sexuality influence attitudes. It seems to reflect more relevance to contextual circumstances than an innate factor of identity. However, it is a fantastic reflection of the tone of attitude toward the use of they and them pronouns. As aforementioned, this is an example of a participant exhibiting a positive attitude toward the use of they and them pronouns. They indicate that they may struggle, but they try and are open to the concept of changing their language. It is not apparent that transphobia holds an influence on the attitudes portrayed here.

The following quotation provides further context for why some participants report a struggle to get used to changing their language use despite a willingness to be open to the idea. It embodies the building tasks of significance and practices, wherein the two tasks balance out the participant's wish to remain unassuming of a person's identity but is trapped within a society in which they are conditioned to view gender in a binary and specific way:

I try not to presume a person's gender and therefore try to use they. However, after a lifetime of socialisation with binary gender, I sometimes forget..

This participant opens with the verb "try" to demonstrate that their attitude is progressive, and they are aware of the social implications of misgendering someone. They indicate that the action they take to do this is to use "they" as a standard practice for everyone, assumedly until they are told to do

otherwise. This is especially interesting when viewed through the lens of Butler's heterosexual matrix (1990) to justify why they struggle with this; "a lifetime of socialisation" has ingrained it upon society to see gender and by extension sexuality as rigid and opposite binaries. As such, it is understandable that some people may forget as this is something you must unlearn in order to fully understand the use of gender-neutral language. This data does not show that gender or sexuality are factors that influence this participant's attitude to the use of gender-neutral language. Though this participant is exhibiting positive tones of attitude, the structure of society leads them to make a snap judgment. The influence of transphobia in this circumstance could be called into question – is it because of the innate transphobia that exists in our society that we are conditioned to view gender in such a binary way? This question cannot be answered using this data but is an interesting one to pose, nonetheless.

The next quotation invokes identity and how identity is related to self-worth as opposed to an external performance:

It's ridiculous. Non-binary is not an "identity." Everyone is non-binary to some extent; we just don't need to make a production out of it to call attention to ourselves and how special we think we are.

This participant states the belief that non-binary is not an identity at all and claims it to be "ridiculous." As previously discussed in section 2.2, this language is commonly used in reference to non-binary identities; they are often associated with childish behaviour and likened to "snowflakes" that just want to feel special. This particular quotation represented this view well. The phrase "everyone is non-binary to some extent" is reminiscent of the very common phrase used in terms of ASD which is: "everyone's a little bit on the spectrum." These statements both belittle the struggles of someone who processes the world differently from what is considered to be the norm, and also brings to question why anyone would be against the identity if it were indeed a universal experience. One may argue that anyone who holds this opinion has this view as they are in fact non-binary but are afraid to come out, even to themselves, due to their awareness of the negative attitudes and difficulties that

come along with the identity. This is shown in research on homosexuality, where it is common for bullies of gay children to be closeted themselves (Swearer et al, 2008). The factors of gender and sexuality are undoubtedly influential in reference to this data as this participant would appear to consider themselves, and everyone, to be on a spectrum of gender that may be subject to fluctuation. In this instance, the influence of these factors seems to curate a negative tone of attitude where the participant becomes unwilling to perform their own gender identity or become audience to anyone else's. This researcher argues that transphobia is very influential in shaping this attitude as, while the participant appears to exhibit open views on gender, they immediately dismiss it as a "performance" that is selfishly used to garner unnecessary attention and improve self-esteem. This is inherently transphobic as it paints those who identify as anything other than their AGAB as simply attention seeking and disruptive, which is not the case.

I use they/them pronouns so it's easy to use them for other people

This quotation provides the opposite end of the spectrum of attitudes based on identity. This person states "I use *They/Them* pronouns". The data shows that their gender identity is non-binary and they have accepted this as true and have friends who respect their pronouns. They explain that because they are used to this language and their close ones respect their pronouns, it is easy and commonplace for them to use gender-neutral pronouns for other people. This indicates that gender identity influences attitudes both negatively and positively; if a person is of a transgender identity, they will come across *They/Them* pronoun use more regularly than someone who does not subscribe to the notion of gender identity at all and therefore the language will feel more natural to them. Similarly, someone who might "feel non-binary" but cannot accept this label for themselves will have an especially hard time using this language as it will invoke fear and uncertainty. This data supports the claim that gender is an influential factor on the attitudes to they and them pronouns. This participant uses those pronouns personally and therefore has no trouble extending that language use onto other people, the data also indicated that the people close to them also use it. This draws the conclusion

that just being close to someone who uses they and them pronouns and identifies as non-binary can make it easier to accept and adapt one's own language. This indicates a very positive and optimistic tone toward the use of the singular pronouns and shows very little influence of transphobia.

The survey provides an open text response where participants are encouraged to describe their own gender identity in whichever way suits them best. These varied responses were sorted into the five gender categories that are provided in the graphs that present the data results: male, female, trans/non-binary, prefer not to say and refused to acknowledge gender; only recognises biological sex. The former, binary gender categories do not contain a lot of variation outside of shorthand patterns of M or F. This is the same for the small number of participants who wrote that they preferred not to say their gender identity. The latter two categories contain much more variation. The category of trans/non-binary identities contains any description that indicated that they either did not identify with a binary gender, this includes responses such as “genderfluid / n/a / genderqueer / non-binary,” and “Demi male/ male/ agender” or responses that explicitly identify themselves as transgender such as “transgender woman”. This means that the binary-gender groupings may contain individuals that are transgender and do not identify with their AGAB, but they did not include this in the description of their identity; this is not to say that this is the only way in which these results could have been categorised and it is entirely possible that the results presented within this research study may have varied slightly. The fifth group consists of participants who resolutely identify themselves as their AGAB. This group, however, is separated from the other binary gender groups despite many of these participants stating that they are female, because they also contain explicit information that indicates that they do not use the term “gender” but rather “sex” which automatically provides results on their attitudes to gender, especially in regard to their views on non-binary gender identities or transitioning between binary gender identities. Some participants that have been included in the fifth grouping have taken the time to make full use of the open-text answer and their responses provide many avenues for consideration. The length of these responses in themselves indicates that the opinions they have chosen to share with the survey are strong beliefs that they want to express.

I don't have a gender identity. I'm female, which means I'm a woman unless people manage to change our language (which I hope they don't)

This quotation from the open text survey results demonstrates one such example from the fifth group of gender identities that are presented in the graphs. This participant uses gender descriptors such as “female” and “woman” which negates the possible conclusion that this participant may be agender due to their initial statement “I don’t have a gender identity.” This is a perfect example of the reasoning behind providing an open text response rather than multiple-choice responses. If the categories of gender had been pre-determined, this participant would possibly be more likely to select “female” and this opportunity to analyse their attitude would not have presented itself. This participant separates themselves from “people” which is likely a reference to society as a whole, but also uses the plural possessive pronouns “our” to indicate that there is a strong community that the “people” they refer to are against. This sense of othering is furthered with the participant’s use of parenthesis in which they provide their own opinion that they like the way language is used as it is and do not wish for this to change. This is a prescriptivist attitude as discussed in detail in the literature review section of this thesis. The comment made by this participant is reminiscent of the theory put forward by Aitchinson (1997) who provides examples and metaphors to describe language change. The metaphor that may be used to describe the participant’s own attitude to language change appears to be in line with the “crumbling castle” metaphor which paints the English language as something that was once a grand, perfect castle which has now fallen into decay; they do not wish to see the language they use change because they think it is perfect as it is. However, it is clear that this participant is aware that language change does happen and while they hope it will not change to make gender-neutral pronouns the norm, they are aware that it could be “managed.”

I do not have a gender - gender is a linguist concept applied to nouns in certain languages e.g., Spanish, French, Italian and of course, Latin. I find it offense to be asked ascribe such a characteristic to myself.

This is another example of the kind of long response that is characteristic of the fifth gender group. As before, this participant has also preceded their response with the statement “I do not have a gender.” Unlike many others, this person does not provide an indication of their sex - or even give any mention of sex at all, but their attitude to the concept of gender is clear, as they comment that they take “offense” to the concept. This response contains many grammatical mistakes such as the misspelling of “Italian” and “characteristic” which alludes to the fact that this response was done quickly, without the participant taking the time to read over what they have written. In this circumstance, it is a likely possibility that this has occurred due to the participant’s strong emotions toward the topic of non-binary identities. It is possible that this participant entered the survey because of its controversial topic, and they were eager to share their opinions on the matter. This participant distances themselves from gender by viewing it as nothing more than a “linguistic concept,” insinuating that it has no real-world value. The participant goes on to list a number of languages that use ‘gendered’ nouns, where *A Table* in Spanish is *La Mesa* with the “La” indicating that this is a feminine noun, with the masculine equivalent being “El.” This is a grammatical concept that the participant is referring to, rather than referring to the social meanings of gender.

As referenced in more detail in section 2.5, the monolingual habitus that exists predominantly in western society causes individuals to be less open to language change as their experience of language use is limited. It is clear that this individual doesn’t believe that the English language uses gendered nouns at all, albeit it does not in the same way as the languages that are referenced in their response, and they insinuate that to identify themselves with a gender would reduce them to the likes of an inanimate object that consisted of the majority of nouns that are gendered in other languages.

I do not have a gender. Gender is the series of sexist stereotypes dictated by society upon my sex class as a means of oppressing us. My sex is female and I am a woman.

The statement “I do not have a gender,” is once again presented as the first sentence of this participant’s response. This participant expresses the belief that gender itself is “a series of sexist

stereotypes” which is itself a “class” that is oppressed. Once again, the terms “female” and “woman” are used, which are both gender markers, but this participant refers to them as “sex” rather than gender. Though this participant is referring to “class” as a reference to gender identity over economic or social class, it is interesting to be aware of how gender and social classes intersect in order to have a better understanding of how women as a class are viewed and treated. According to the *#metoo* survey, using a nationally representative portion of 2000 adults, 81% of women reported that they have been sexually assaulted with the figure for males being almost half of this at 43% (Kearl, 2018). The glass ceiling concept also remains prevalent in today’s society with very few women in positions of power in comparison to men, a recent OECD report projects that the economic separation of men and women in high level positions will widen a further 12% by 2030 if no action on the gender bias is taken (Espinosa & Ferreira, 2022) and even at a lower level, women earn less than men as demonstrated in a study into European wage gaps which finds “the unexplained gender wage gap widens at the top (glass ceiling effects) and at the bottom of the distribution (sticky floor effects) in many countries.” (Christofides et al, 2013 p.25). This is a problem that having a gender identity that is different from your biological sex does not change; it is a systematic issue that affects everyone regardless of personal identity. Class is an entirely different concept altogether. While gender and class do intersect, they are different. For example, while the male population may hold more power over the female population, a woman of a higher class is more likely to hold more power over a man of lower class. Conventional class has been redefined as a complex and fragmented reflection on social and economic values (Bottero, 2004) which has bearing on gender identity.

The results that are presented throughout section 4.1, along with the analysis of the open-text responses to the survey question that asks participants to self-identify their gender, indicates that there is a large group of people assigned female at birth who have strong attitudes against the use of *They/Them* pronouns and indeed the concept of gender itself. This may be explained by the influence of JK Rowling and the radical ‘feminist’ movement that she has inspired that creates hostility and fear toward transgender and non-binary individuals by painting these people to be “dangerous” cis-gender

men who are lying about their gender in order to gain access to female only spaces. Given the high percentage of women who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault in comparison to men, it is easy to understand how this fear mongering tactic has been so effective. The effectiveness of this also highlights a possible reason the group of participants that have identified themselves as homosexual are the least likely group of all the groups of sexualities to change their language use; given the incredibly sparse number of participants who identify as male and indeed the lack of responses within the group of those that “refuse to acknowledge gender” that are of the male sex, means that the majority of these homosexual participants are likely women who are attracted to other women. Those identifying as queer, on the other hand, see a lot of intersection with those identifying as non-binary or trans and the intersection of these factors. As aforementioned, this creates an accepting community to gender-neutral language based on mutual experience and therefore implying that this group of people have given much more introspective thought about their own gender given their identity with the fluid, binary-resistant label, “queer,” which has a very fluid meaning, often shown to mean something other than the norm, This term is celebrated for its flexibility within the English language; though it may simply mean “not normal” or “not heterosexual” in the context of heteronormativity, queer identities can be more than this. “Often there is a political ideology or intent when this word is used, based in part on a decision to confront what is experienced as discrimination and to commit to a collective identity based on being marginalized because of one's sexuality, rather than simply identification because of one's gender and the object of one's affection,” (Dilley, 1999: p.458). The willingness to “queer” expectations of sexuality and be more open to new experiences shows a direct correlation to being more accepting of language change as these participants do not want to be restricted in their identity any more than the political nature of being *not normal* can force them to be.

The results discussed in section 4.1 demonstrate that there is a large number of responses signifying that they would use *Other* pronouns to refer to the models presented in section C of the survey. This option was offered to give participants the opportunity to provide neo-pronouns in the event that

they may have wanted to use a gender-neutral pronoun but did not like the use of *They/them* as research shows some individuals dislike the fact that non-binary identities lack their own individual language use (Hakenen, 2021). The open text responses that participants have shared in the optional section asking for an explanation of their choice demonstrates that some participants have used this option for a different purpose: the use of the model's name and the avoidance of all pronouns.

On one hand, it can be argued that this reluctance to assume a gender immediately is a sign of a positive and accepting attitude, but the way the factors intersect and taking into account the results from section B, there is a stronger inclination to believe the opposite of this and suggest that this shows that those who are selecting *Other* as an option to refer to the image are those who are less likely to change their language use to incorporate more gender neutrality. This demonstrates a more robust attitude to this form of language change and suggests that what figure 4 in section 4.1 is indeed showing is that the factor of age provides very little influence upon how the participants of this survey perceive gender, which was also the conclusion that is taken from the analysis of the results presented in section B.

Appears to be male person - albeit wearing some female type clothing. I would ascertain whether this person is male (wearing female type clothing) or possibly transidentifying 'intact' or altered man, pretending to be a woman. If male I would use usual male pronouns. If trans I would use no pronouns at all.

This is an explanation given by one such participant who indicated that they would use *Other* pronouns to refer to the image presented to them, shown in figure 11. This particular response is interesting as the participant provides a conditional response that would depend on the model's biological sex. They use the phrase "pretending to be a woman" to acknowledge that the gender presentation of the model is feminine but refuses to use any pronouns at all to support this. "If male I would use male pronouns" indicates that they will only use a pronoun that they believe is representative of the model's biological sex. Furthermore, their use of "'intact' or altered man" demonstrates that their opinion of this model's gender would not change if the model had gender affirming surgery or not;

they will either acknowledge the biological sex or not acknowledge the model at all. It is interesting to note that this participant gives no space for debate over the biological sex of the model despite the fact that the image does not show any indisputable evidence that the biological sex of the model is male – it would be possible for this model to be any sex, biologically speaking. There are other participants who cite “Adam’s apple/bone structure” as evidence to the model’s supposed male gender. These participants are all part of the older age-groups and the “refuses to acknowledge gender; only biological sex” gender group. With this knowledge, there is cause to explore biological essentialism as a reason for these attitudes. Biological essentialism is the opposite of social constructionism. Where the latter views an individual as an empty vessel upon which social influences and personal choice lead to the construction of identity, biological essentialism views each individual as someone with a pre-determined biology that is static and unchangeable (DeCecco & Elia, 2010). Though it is widely agreed that these two ideologies work in tandem with each other, and both have their merits, there is too much evidence to suggest that neither one can exist alone (cit op). Given that most of the participants who express this opinion both identify with the “rejects gender” gender group and also the “homosexual” sexuality group, it can be suggested that the biological essentialist beliefs may be grounded in the *Born this way* mentality that comforts many people who are ‘coming out’. If one is born as one thing, and must fight for people to accept that, it is understandable that their views on the topic of gender – which is often seen to be intrinsically linked to sexuality – are just as rigid. On the other hand, it is reductive to see gender and sexuality as intrinsically linked. Though they are often discussed together, they are different identities which are equally determined by a mixture of biological and social factors.

This is a man with long hair wearing a skirt and heels. So, I would refer to them as he/him.

However, I would use their name. Pronouns are not meant to be special to a person.

This participant displays an attitude that is in keeping with those who base their assumptions on the sole factor of biological features. They first describe the image as they see it, stating that the model is a “man” and that they would therefore use *He/Him* pronouns. However, this participant is one who

selected that they would use *Other* which is indicated by the assertion that they would “use their name.” It is interesting that this person is asserting their belief that this model is a man and therefore should be referred to using *He/Him* pronouns, but when they do refer to the model in their response they stated, “I would use their name,” as opposed to “I would use his name.” This is an example of how variation of the pronoun “they” may be subconsciously used in language to refer to a singular individual, regularly. Why would this pronoun be used by someone who has expressed an oppositional view towards acknowledging a person’s gender identity? It may be argued that the use of the gender-neutral pronoun is used because they are referring to a person they have not yet met and therefore there is no conscious stereotype in place to affect pronoun usage. A study on reading comprehension in reference to the general *He* and singular *They* concludes that “singular *they* are an acceptable substitution for gender-specific pronouns with nonreferential antecedents, which are quite possibly ambiguous as to gender. In contrast, singular *they* are less acceptable with referential antecedents, for which there should be no ambiguity about gender,” (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 2015: p.8). These findings reveal that the reason the participant is able to use “their” instead of a gendered pronoun is due to the ambiguity of the model’s gender, meaning the reader’s comprehension is uninhibited. However, as previously mentioned in section 2.1, Foertsch and Gernsbacher (2015) base their empirical research on using these pronouns in reference to professions, not people. This means that the reading comprehension of the subjects to their study was based upon the stereotypes that assume a gender for “doctor” or “nurse”. Because these stereotypes are subject to change as society strives for greater gender equality, it is also true to say that the comprehension of singular *they* can improve too. Author and activist, Shalasko states the belief that the use of *They/Them* in singular form would occur even more naturally had it not been taught in schools to everyone from a young age. They observe that this singular pronoun use has been in effect “Since long before it started being adopted by trans communities, people have used singular they to refer to a hypothetical person whose gender is unknown. It’s especially common in reference to a noun that is syntactically singular but logically plural, like “someone,” “anyone,” and “whoever.” (2015: 2) The following example taken from the

survey results demonstrates a more accepting attitude that is in agreement with Shalasko, giving further evidence that comprehension of singular *They/Them* usage can improve.

This person is a stranger who doesn't appear cisgender to me, but they maybe. For this reason, I would not assume this person's gender as this person may identify as she/he or they/them, or something else. Using this person's name would feel the safer until this person confirms but I would try to avoid pronouns until confirmed. I can get worried of getting a person's pronouns wrong as I wouldn't want to cause discomfort or distress.

This participant is one of a few who state they would prefer to refer to the model by name, not with any pronouns. This is possibly a politeness tactic as the participant states that “wouldn’t want to cause discomfort or distress.” They acknowledge that there is an identifiable discrepancy between the gender presentation and biological features, just as participant’s whose responses have been analysed above. Despite similar observations being made, it is clear that this participant has a positive attitude to using gender-neutral language as they offer the information that they would be willing to use any pronoun be it *He/Him*, *She/Her*, *They/Them* or “something else” and feels it would be “safer” to refer to the model by name until the “stranger” status is lifted and they have the opportunity to ask the person what pronouns they use. This demonstrates a more accepting response to the same stimulus as the participant who would use the model’s name instead of using a pronoun that would validate their gender identity. Both are aware of the biological factors that indicate this model was most likely assigned male at birth, but one responds with prejudice while the other responds with caution and respect.

4.3 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS PART 2: LINGUISTIC PATTERNS

While the previous section took a sociolinguistic analytical approach to the open-text responses from participants to help to explain the reasons for the attitudes presented in the results, this section will identify common linguistic patterns that are present in the open text responses. In doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of the results can be analysed. These quotations stood out from the

rest and have been selected based on the volume of the response, which gave more space to highlight linguistic patterns, and some have been chosen based on modal form.

Why would I refer to someone in the third person when they are present? Also, the rules of grammar are not up for dissection. If I used such terms, I would be under explicit threat to overwhelm my own wishes and abandon my personal belief about reality to force me to use compelled speech.

This phrase “compelled speech” is repeated in the results a total of 61 counts throughout the responses to the survey. Interestingly, all of these remarks are made by participants who refuse to acknowledge gender as an identity. This phrase is seen in response to the “how likely” questions that ask if the respondent would change their language to include, *They/Them* pronouns if they were asked to. In naming this compelled speech, these people are expressing a feeling of being controlled or manipulated by people who are pushing for this shift in language use. This tells us that the negative attitude that is shown comes from a place of insecurity and fear; they may feel a lack of control over other aspects of their lives and when presented with a change that they view as going against what they once believed to be an intrinsic truth – that gender is binary and always corresponds to assigned sex at birth. With “compelled speech” being the opposite of free speech, they are seeming to view this request as stripping them of their rights to use their own language in whatever way they want to. These participants are not only refusing to refer to individuals in the way they wish to be referred by claiming it is their right to have free speech and use language in whichever way they personally choose, while also claiming “the rules of grammar are not up for dissection.” Once again there is a strong theme of prescriptivist notions that are evident within these attitudes into rigid and non-debatable topics. This miseducated and static view on language is what has shaped this fear of language change. However, if activists such as Shalasko (2015) are to be believed, future generations may hold more tolerance to language change with a decrease of prescriptive and restrictive notions of grammar being taught in schools. This notion is supported by the results showing the higher tolerance to *They/Them* pronouns shown by the younger-aged participants of the survey.

Another common theme that is present among the responses of participants who hold strong negative attitudes towards the use of singular *They/Them* pronouns is the use of extended paragraphs containing features of persuasive language such as rhetorical questions and personal pronouns. The following extract from an open text response to how likely a participant would be to use *They/Them* pronouns for someone they just met is one of the longer explanations of a participant's choice – which was reported as 'very unlikely' – and is worthy of analysis.

Probably not. I believe nonbinary identities came up when males started redefining womanhood based on their feelings. After all, categories need some traits that all members possesses. Of course, women used to be the female sex class. Once males decided they should included also in that category. Women needed to find a new definition or traits that holds true for all members. [...] How do we then communicate the word women to other people? How do then give a population rights and protections in law whose definitions in constant flux and even contradict? You can't. [...] What does it mean to feel like a woman? What do all women feel and what is feeling is like? What does it mean to identify as a women? What traits that all women share, are you identifying with?

This participant demonstrates an awareness of the way the concept of gender is "in constant flux" but as opposed to the gender theories discussed in research such as Butler (1990) that explore gender as an individual experience, influenced by external factors. This participant expresses the belief that this fluctuation is inflicted upon women by men who have "decided they should be a part of the category." This is supportive of the suggestions made in previous sections of this research that these negative attitudes are influenced by the fearmongering of 'radical feminists' who tend to make counterclaims about prejudice in order to conceal their own prejudice, such as Rowling (2020) who reduces identities that differ from the biological sex to a belief that it is simply a "man pretending to be a woman." The use of rhetorical questions elicits further evidence of emotions of fear for this participant shown with "How do you then give a population rights and protections [...]? You can't." Here, the phrase "how do you" is repeated by the participant numerous times, either as a persuasion tactic or a simple

conveyance of confusion. The former explanation is more likely, due to the short statement “you can’t,” which shows this participant’s extreme stance against using *They/Them* pronouns for the reason that it would strip women of their rights and protections. The continued use of the personal pronoun “you” is another persuasion tactic used to make the reader feel personally responsible for these issues. The use of these linguistic tools of persuasion indicates that this participant is an active advocate for women’s rights and shares the ‘radical feminist’ views that seek to exclude trans women and non-binary individuals from ‘female only’ groups such as Rowling’s women’s protection charity. The modal pattern of capital letters is a common theme among the responses of participants. Particularly those with negative attitudes as demonstrated by the following response.

My SEX is WOMAN BORN WOMAN. Gender is a social construct. DON'T CALL ME "CIS-WOMAN" or FORCE ME TO WEAR PINK!!!

The use of capital letters and exclamation marks in this response is a clear indicator of the participant’s strong emotional response with gender stereotypes which has resulted in the misplaced anger toward gender identity markers with their rejection of the term “cis woman” which would be the automatic term for someone who was “born a woman” as this participant describes themselves as. Here it is clear that this participant does not believe that the existence of varied gender identities should exist and there should be no option to identify as anything other than their biological sex which this participant clearly sees as synonymous with the gender that is assigned to them at birth. The “FORCE ME TO WEAR PINK” statement that manifests the stereotype that girls should like the colour pink and boys should like the colour blue gives cause to speculate that this description of gender may be satirical. Milner (2013) explores how internet memes both reflect and influence society’s view on identity. In this research it is explored how ‘trolling’ is used to spread negative discourse in the form of satire and memes; “Trolling performs the work of both ‘cultural critic’ and ‘cultural syphon’, using humour and antagonism to rile angry responses and shift the content and tone of the conversation” (Milner, 2013: p.12). Given the other responses of this individual indicating that their attitude toward gender neutrality is indeed extremely negative, it may be argued that this respondent is either a troll

response or they have been exposed to satire accounts of gender identity and womanhood but has taken it seriously and this has shaped their understanding that those who adopt gender-neutral language or use descriptors such as “cis gender” are the party responsible for “forcing” women to like pink and other gender stereotypes.

The medium level of likeliness to use *They/Them* pronoun open-text responses show a running theme of “politeness” while still showing a reluctance to be accepting of non-binary identities. The following example shows one such response wherein the respondent has indicated that they are “somewhat likely” to use *They/Them* pronouns to refer to an individual who has requested they be referred to in such a way.

If someone tells me they require me to use a pronoun for them when we just met I will be perfectly polite but I’m likely not going to want to get to know them better.

It can be assumed based upon the initial answer to the response that this individual’s idea of being “perfectly polite” would be to refer to the person who has requested *They/Them* pronouns in such a way. Brown (2015) defines politeness in relation to Gricean maxims: “Politeness is essentially a matter of taking into account the feelings of others as to how they should be interactionally treated, including behaving in a manner that demonstrates appropriate concern for interactors’ social status and their social relationship.” This also suggests that a lack of politeness negatively impacts the speaker’s social status and relationships which may implicate that this participant’s concern with being “perfectly polite” is simply an act they feel they must do to remain in good societal standing. This is supported with the conjunction of, “but” which indicates that the attitude of this respondent is just as negative as those who indicated that they would be “extremely unlikely” to use *They/Them* pronouns. Another open-text response for a reply that indicated they would be “somewhat likely” to use *They/Them* pronouns supports this analysis further, as follows:

There’s also the fact that I- a survivor of multiple rape, just like so many female people- would be sent rape threats, death threats, silenced, harassed, cancelled, doxxed and have my livelihood and future prospects ruined if I simply told the truth about this matter; not likely by

non-binary females, raised to be “nice” and accommodating by me, but very likely by non-binary males, who, like self-proclaimed “male feminists,” mostly adopt the non-binary identity so they get away with bad behavior, in their particular case by claiming some imaginary oppression. I would use non-binary women’s pronouns to be kind, and non-binary men’s pronouns to avoid retaliation or violence.

This participant separates non-binary individuals into AFAB and AMAB validating this distinction with the notion that males and females are socialised differently. Here it is clear that this individual sees it as a kindness and a necessity to use *They/Them* pronouns, but it is evident that there is a significant threat posed by AMAB individuals to this respondent which causes their attitude to be negative as it is influenced by fear of grievous harm and threat rather than a will to give acceptance. The participant lists many verbs that they fear will have done to them if they were to not respect a person’s pronoun use even if they would prefer not to. The verbs “threats” and “silenced” support the assumption that their attitude is ruled by fear while the use of “doxxed” and “cancelled” insinuate that it is not just personal harm that they fear but also isolation. This indicates that the participant is aware of the changing attitude toward non-binary identities and can see that there are many people who are pushing for inclusion and acceptance of gender-neutral language and non-binary identities. Though it is clear that this participant would rather not participate in this inclusionary language, they begrudgingly do so, so as not to isolate themselves and others and also protect themselves from this perceived harm. As there is a considerable pattern of responses such as the ones discussed here, this indicates that many of the statistics shown in figures 4, 5 and 6 demonstrate a much higher rate of negative attitudes than was initially concluded.

Oftentimes throughout the results of this study, participants express a self-awareness of understanding the significance of respecting a person’s pronouns but also admit to forgetting or struggling.

Sometimes I use they when I don't know someone's gender but tbh I do assume a lot of the time

The use of “sometimes” is indicative of such self-awareness. This participant confesses that *They/Them* is not their normal use of language but is something they try to use when they’re unsure of what gender the individual identifies with. This is something that is hinged upon the participant’s initial assumption of gender. This indicates that this participant would use gendered pronouns most of the time, unless an individual presents with full androgyny. This happening “a lot of the time” points to the reasoning for many social movements to spread awareness that non-binary identities do not owe androgyny. This participant highlights how many people are aware of non-binary identities and do not hold strong opinions on the use of singular *They/Them* pronouns. However, they will still automatically use gendered pronouns based upon first impressions ruled by stereotypes and preconceived notions of gender. Because of this automatic assumption, most non-binary identifying individuals are responsible for advocating for their own gender, having to bring up their gender identity with every new relationship which can greatly worsen GD. Despite this, it is a positive outcome that this respondent is self-aware of their language use and holds the perspective that they will attempt to use gender neutral language. Even though it is only “sometimes” at present, being aware of one’s language use and aware of the social and personal repercussions using gendered language to refer to trans non-binary individuals means that this participant may become more versed in using gender neutral language resulting in the non-binary people that enter this person’s life will no longer have to self-advocate for their correct pronouns.

Though the participants that have positive attitudes toward the use of singular *They/Them* pronouns to refer to individuals who identify as non-binary are less prominent than the attitudes that have previously been explored, there are still linguistic patterns that will allow this research to gain a clearer understanding of the attitudes that are present.

It's basic human courtesy — you don't decide other people's names, and the same goes for pronouns

The statement given by a respondent who has demonstrated a positive attitude to the use of *They/Them* pronouns uses the adjective “basic” which is a common theme among open text responses

that are from accepting respondents. The use of this adjective connoting something should be easy and expected demonstrates the notion of absurdity that using *They/Them* pronouns when they are requested is not the automatic 'norm'. Despite this being the attitude that is presented by this respondent and some others, for western politics "There is [...] a lot to be done in terms of connecting up non-binary activism worldwide, campaigning within the UN universal human rights framework and the Council of Europe transgender resolution (which are inclusive of non-binary people), and learning from countries and cultures outside the west which are often further forward in terms of recognition of non-binary genders," (Bear and Barker, 2017). With this recorded lack of worldwide recognition of transgender identities, it is naturally unsurprising that the percentage of accepting participants is overall lower than those who are not accepting. This participant's reference to "names" offers insight into the absurdity of assumption; it is commonplace to ask a person's name before interacting with them in any great detail as you would not continue into conversation and assume a name. This participant draws a parallel between these concepts to express their view that a person's pronouns should always be asked for before using them.

I'd want to be respectful, and I'd try to remind myself and get used to the different pronoun.

This participant is echoing the understanding that this is a "basic" thing to be asked and cites that they wish to be "respectful" with no condition that they do not agree with it. Their attitude is presented as accepting but they also acknowledge their personal restrictions in that they would need to "get used to" using pronouns that are different to the ones they are used to using. This self-reflection is a promising notion that demonstrates a willingness to learn alongside an understanding that this is a new concept to them as an individual. Though they feel that a reminder would be required, it is promising to note that they say "remind myself" instead of asking the person to whom they are referring to for that reminder. In taking the responsibility to remember onto themselves instead of putting it off on the affected party indicates once more that self-advocacy will not be burdened onto any non-binary individual that is affiliated with this respondent. That this participant is able to accept

that language is changing and change with it gives hope that with time and representation, attitudes to the singular use of *They/Them* pronouns to refer to non-binary individuals will eventually improve.

Rather use a more neutral pronoun than misgender someone.

The use of “neutral” is referenced a count of 87 times across the results provided by the participants. Here, these participants voice their opinion that the use of *They/Them* pronouns in a singular sense are a positive way of avoiding a misgender of someone. Until the subject of the pronouns has provided the pronouns of which they wish to have used to refer to them, many participants observe the use of *they/them* as a safe starting point as it does not signify one binary or the other. These participants often demonstrate an understanding that if the person wishes to be referred to with a specific pronoun, they will correct the speaker. If the person, on the other hand, holds no importance to what their gender identity is or how they would wish to be referred to, *They/Them* is unchallenging and flows well into language use and will go unnoticed, therefore being the least likely pronoun choice to cause offence. This respondent does not take into account that if a binary trans person were to be referred to using, *They/Them* pronouns, it would still be misgendering. However, it is most likely not taken into account because there is no social expectation on how a non-binary individual will present and therefore is more likely to be misgendered in a society that largely does not recognise gender-neutral language as a default; someone who uses a gendered pronoun that is significant to them would in turn correct the speaker who would be expected to respect that going forward. A cis-gendered individual, on the other hand would be less likely to notice the gender-neutral pronoun use.

basic respect. I'm trans, and if i don't know their pronoun ill assume they until I can ask/they tell me

Again, the adjective “basic” is utilised along with an explanation that supports the analysis of the previous extract, with the assertion that “neutral” pronouns are best until the person requests otherwise. This particular participant provides the information “I’m trans,” as further explanation of why they would use immediate *They/Them* pronouns as opposed to gendered language. This

insinuates that this participant uses gender neutral pronouns for themselves and so would endeavour specially to use another person's correct pronouns and not assume anything from presentation alone. This further supports the conclusion that gender is one of the most influential factors in the shaping of one's attitude to the use of singular *They/Them* pronouns. Unlike participants who are primarily concerned with saving face and using politeness tactics, this participant expresses an interest in asking or being told by the individual. The participant's admission that they would either wait to be told or they would ask is a reflection of the context of gender politics. Given that non-binary gender identities exist outside of the social norm, it may not always be prudent to outright ask a person's pronouns. This participant wishes to "wait" and show respect but does not expect that the individual in question would be the only party that is responsible for offering the information. This demonstrates an inclination to truly care about the individual's feelings and opinions on their own gender identity, not just acting within social niceties and fear of ostracization.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to collect data that represented the attitudes held in society toward the use of singular *They/Them* pronouns to refer to individuals who identify as non-binary. The large volume of responses proved challenging to condense into the scope of this research and this researcher's personal closeness to the topic made the separation of academic study and advocacy a challenge. Nevertheless, it is exactly for this reason that this research holds merit as it is important for researchers to have real-life experience of the subject to provide poignant conclusions to the data that has been collected.

The findings demonstrate how individuals can internalise gender stereotypes in such a way that their outward attitude to other's individual gender identity can be severely affected. The general tone of the attitudes shown in the data examined throughout this thesis is negative. Much of the negative attitudes appear to be ruled by gender identity. Specifically, the largest group of participants to exhibit the most negative attitudes were those that refused to identify with a gender and preferred to provide their sex – to which the majority was female. While there is also clear evidence that demonstrates

how one of an older age group may have more conservative views on gender and views on what is grammatically correct, the overall most influential factor that has been examined within this research is gender due to the existence of the category of those who do not identify with gender, only biological sex. This group voices incredibly negative attitudes specifically to transgender individuals. Their negative attitudes to the use of gender-neutral pronouns *They/Them* is clearly rooted in transphobia and a belief that non-binary gender identities are childish or not real. Though this group is the most prominent within the data collected for this research as having the lowest average of acceptance across all of the results, the evidence is lacking to suggest that this is representative of actual society. Despite this drawback, the fact that such a large number of people of this disposition chose to participate in this voluntary research demonstrates how these individuals' feelings on this topic are strong and shared loudly and willingly. Historically, it is not always the largest portion of society that influences the 'norm' but the loudest – these are the small portion of society who are likely to prosper in a society that remains unchanged and take every chance they get to share their negative opinion. This is shown in the disproportionate amount of participants who identify with the female sex as opposed to any gender, many of which share similar negative attitudes. These attitudes are often missed in research due to the research finding positive attitudes to gender and sexuality which makes these findings incredibly valuable.

The opposite end of the spectrum of attitudes presented in the results of this research demonstrates that the factor of sexuality being the most influential factor in shaping participant's attitudes in a positive manner with the highest overall likelihood to use they and them pronouns presenting in the group of queer identifying participants. As explored throughout the discussion of results, it is believed that this is due to the immersion of queer individuals in groups of wider diversity of gender, sexuality, and individual presentation. With an identity such as queer that does not encapsulate any form of rigid definition, it is possible that such individuals have a higher chance of forming close relationships or identifying themselves as non-binary. Not only is their real-life probability of interacting with a higher percentage of non-binary individuals, their likelihood of existing in the same internet

communities is higher as queer sexualities and genderqueer identities are often celebrated within the same community. This indicates that a people who share similar struggles of non-binary individuals or know someone who they are close to who is non-binary, have an easier time using *They/Them* singular pronouns.

By taking these findings into consideration, it can be suggested that work to eradicate gender bias and stereotypes from the societal norm and further celebration of diversity are actions that can be taken to expedite the progression of positive attitudes toward non-binary identities and gender-neutral language use across society. The existing research that has been discussed in section 2.4 of this study demonstrates how media representation has a profound effect on tackling stereotypes and raising awareness and understanding of minority groups. This is not echoed in the qualitative data analysis of the results of this study with no references to media. This demonstrates the importance of positive and accurate representation of non-binary identities in mainstream media and how lacking society is of such a thing. The term 'any representation is good representation' is not true for this matter as there are more references to negative media to explain negative attitudes than there are for the opposite.

5.1 POTENTIAL USES OF DATA

Due to the volume of responses to the survey used to collect the data used in this research, there is much more information revealed within the results than what has been analysed within this thesis. As such, there is the opportunity for further research to be carried out based upon the results of the survey. It would be interesting to separate each response into an individual profile in order to thoroughly explore the language that each participant uses to both explain their own identity and their attitudes toward non-binary identities. The other factors that have been questioned in the survey but left out of the analysis due to the high variation of results include ethnicity and religion, each present unique insights into each participant's experience that would be valuable to explore in addition to the research presented here. Because the factors of ethnicity and religion have more of a

bearing on the social surroundings of an individual and may even speak to the upbringing of an individual this is data that would be beneficial to explore but would require a much deeper exploration than this research had the capacity for.

5.2 PRACTICAL USES OF RESEARCH

The goal of this research has always been to provide insight into why people hold the attitudes that are demonstrated throughout this research toward this language use. In gaining an understanding of the factors that hold a lot of influence over attitudes toward the use of *They/Them* singular pronouns and exploring the reasons why these factors hold influence over these attitudes can provide a starting point for individuals to understand other perspectives and gain acceptance so that non-binary people can feel safe to use the language that they feel most comfortable with. Given that this research demonstrates much of the negative attitudes are founded in a fear that individuals who identify as a gender other than their AGAB or biological sex are simply pretending to be a gender that will allow them access to women-only spaces in order to prey on vulnerable women, providing a more in depth explanation of what it is to be non-binary and assuage any fear that people who identify as non-binary would be any more likely to cause harm to vulnerable women than anyone else in society. Another practical use of this data would be to use it as proof that negative attitudes are present in a substantial manner. It is easy to believe that progress in gender equality and acceptance has been made to an extent that non-binary people face no danger of discrimination or harm. Much of the existing research around non-binary identities captures attitudes that are accepting of non-binary identities, but this research exhibits a large portion of negative attitudes that provide evidence of people avidly rejecting and resolutely disregarding the validity of any gender identity that differs from ones AGAB. This is a positive result, despite the largely negative findings, as it is only with an understanding of what the negative attitudes are and an exploration of some of the reasons why this may be, that effective training and discussion can be carried out in order to improve attitudes to non-binary identities and the use of singular, gender neutral *They/Them* pronouns.

6.0 APPENDIX

Blank survey:

Also available at:

https://yorksj.eu.qualtrics.com/ife/preview/SV_6G0xWKAZHHJrMm9?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=current

Participant information

Name of School: York St John University

Name of researcher: Sarah Hatfield

Study Title: Language and non-binary gender identities: Understanding and Changing negative attitudes toward singular 'they/them' pronouns

What is the purpose of this study?

The aim of this study is to explore the factors that affect the general attitudes toward using different pronouns for transgender individuals.

Your Participation:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. In order to take part in the study you will be asked to tick the box on the next page to give your consent. You have a right to withdraw your data from the study you can do this within 2 weeks of taking part in the study. Before starting the survey, you will be given a 12-digit number and if you wish to withdraw your data then you can request this by emailing sarah.hatfield1@yorksj.ac.uk and providing that number.

The Study:

You are asked to complete this survey providing some personal details about yourself, such as your gender and sexuality, and your opinions on certain situations. You are also encouraged to give an explanation of your choices; this will allow for more in-depth and accurate results. These responses can be as brief or detailed as you wish. You are reminded that this is an anonymous survey so please give honest answers.

Are there any risks to taking part?

There are no particular risks to taking part – if you do not feel comfortable disclosing your thoughts then you do not have to; any question you are uncomfortable answering may be left blank.

If you are finding yourself feeling uncomfortable or confused because of the subject of this research, below are links to some charities you may turn to for support and advice.

<https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/>

<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/>

Data Protection:

Data will be stored in a secure digital format. No personal names will be recorded; instead, your data will be identified only by an assigned participant number. Data may be used in the preparation of published research which will be made available on the university's RAY repository (<https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/>) and through the Open Science Framework (www.osf.io). Identifying information will not be included in the reported results.

Thank you for reading this information.

This study has been granted ethical approval by the York St John School Research Ethics Committee (Education, Language and Psychology). If you have any questions / concerns, please contact Scott Cole, s.cole1@yorks.ac.uk.

I consent to the use of my data in this survey

Agree

Disagree

Above is your 12-digit number that you are invited to take note of if you think you may wish to have your data deleted. To have your response removed, please send the above number to sarah.hatfield1@yorks.ac.uk within 2 weeks of completing this survey.

What is your age?

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65-74

75+

YOU ARE INVITED TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN WHICHEVER WAY YOU FEEL FITS YOU BEST. IF YOU ARE UNSURE OR WOULD PREFER NOT TO SAY, YOU ARE WELCOME TO SAY AS SUCH OR LEAVE THE QUESTION BLANK. DO KEEP IN MIND THAT LEAVING QUESTIONS BLANK WILL AFFECT THE ACCURACY OF THIS RESEARCH.

What is your gender?

—

What is your sexuality?

—

What is your ethnicity?

—

Are you religious? (If yes, please specify)

Yes

—

No

Prefer not to say

Section A: KNOWLEDGE

1A: Do you know what a pronoun is?

Yes

No

Not sure

(A pronoun refers to someone or something that has already been mentioned. E.g., He/him; She/her; They/them; We/us; I/me

***Please do not change your original answer as this will affect the outcome of the research)**

2A: Do you think it is grammatically correct to use they/them to refer to a singular person?

Yes

No

Sometimes

3A: Have you heard of the term non-binary gender?

Yes

No

Not sure

(Non-Binary gender is a gender identity that is used by individuals who do not identify as male or female. They will sometimes choose to use non-gendered pronouns.

***Please do not change your original answer as this will affect the outcome of the research)**

4A: Do you know someone who identifies as non-binary?

Yes

No

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AS HONESTLY AS YOU CAN. FILLING IN THE OPTIONAL QUESTIONS WILL GIVE THIS RESEARCH MORE ACCURACY SO YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO GIVE AS MUCH INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR CHOICES AS POSSIBLE.

SECTION B: How Likely are you to...

1B: Use they/them pronouns for someone you have just met?

Extremely likely

Moderately likely

Neither

Moderately unlikely

Extremely unlikely

Explain your choice (optional)

2B: Change what pronouns you use to refer to a close friend or partner, if they asked you to?

Extremely likely

Moderately likely
Neither
Moderately unlikely
Extremely unlikely

Explain your choice (optional)

3B: Use they/them pronouns to refer to someone in your family if they asked you to?

Extremely likely
Moderately likely
Neither
Moderately unlikely
Extremely unlikely

Explain your choice (optional)

SECTION C: VISUAL PROMPTS

Select the pronouns you would be most likely use to refer to the person in the picture



1C

He/Him
She/Her
They/Them
Other

Explain your choice (optional)



2C:

He/Him

She/Her

They/Them

Other

Explain your choice (optional)



3C:

He/Him

She/Her

They/Them

Other

Explain your choice (optional)



4C:

He/Him

She/Her

They/Them

Other

Explain your choice (optional)



4C:

He/Him

She/Her

They/Them

Other

Explain your choice (optional)

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.

Your response has been recorded.

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