

## Doing Gender Beyond the Binary: A Virtual Ethnography

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*This article advances the “doing gender” framework by highlighting some unique interactive challenges that nonbinary individuals encounter within the binary gender system. In order to access testimony about these experiences from a large group of people, this study turns to a genderqueer community on the social media site Reddit. Discourse analysis of discussion threads and content analysis of selfies reveal various symbolic mechanisms through which nonbinary people do, redo, and undo gender. These findings illuminate a range of strategies that people utilize to negotiate gender attribution within the gender binary system. A video abstract is available at <http://tinyurl.com/y7odrxbd>.*

Keywords: Reddit, virtual ethnography, genderqueer, transgender, nonbinary

In 2016, *Symbolic Interaction* published a symposium on trans issues; however, all three of these articles featured binary transgender (transman/transwoman) case studies (Fenstermaker 2016; O’Brien 2016; Schilt 2006). Such a homogenous focus is problematic because binary transgender experiences do not represent the full complexity and rich diversity of transgender experience; and yet, research on nonbinary transgender individuals remains relatively scarce. Even when nonbinary identities such as “genderqueer” (GQ) are included in researchers’ samples, they often become subsumed under the “transgender umbrella,” a trend which further obfuscates nonbinary particularities (e.g., Connell 2010).

Symbolic interactionists have dedicated considerable attention to exploring how binary transgender individuals navigate society’s investment in the sex/gender system, in arenas ranging from the workplace (Connell 2010; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009), the school system (Nowakowski, Sumerau, and Mathers 2016), the healthcare system (Miller and Grollman 2015), religion (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016), relationships (Pfeffer 2010, 2012), and the public sphere (Pfeffer 2014). However, as with the recent symposium, nonbinary experiences and

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populations are only ever mentioned in passing within this literature. Yet, survey data indicate that nonbinary people (NBs) encounter very different experiences in society than their binary transgender counterparts (Factor and Rothblum 2008; Harrison-Quintana, Grant, and Rivera 2015; Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012). Without qualitative research on nonbinary experiences, it is difficult to make sense of these data.

Fortunately, despite the dearth of research on nonbinary gender identities, the Internet is rife with information about the particularities of nonbinary experiences, such as social media groups that are dedicated to this identity category. Therefore, in order to learn more about how NBs “do gender,” this study turns to a social media community that is dedicated to the GQ identity (the most common nonbinary identity label). This virtual ethnography asks (1) how do people attempt to “do nonbinary gender”; (2) under what circumstances does nonbinary gender “succeed” in interactionist terms; and (3) does the doing of nonbinary gender contribute toward the redoing or undoing of (binary) gender? The results section is divided into three sections: the first analyzes how members of this community understand their gender identity, the second analyzes their strategies for displaying their gender, and the third analyzes unique aspects of their “coming out” process. These findings contribute toward symbolic interactionist accounts of transgender experiences by highlighting the particular challenges that nonbinary individuals encounter while attempting to do their gender within a binary gender system. Second, this study advances digital sociology by highlighting how such social media communities contribute toward the redoing of gender.

## DOING GENDER

West and Zimmerman (1987) famously proposed that gender is not something we have, but rather something we do, a routine accomplishment that we *achieve* through interactions in our everyday lives. “Doing gender” is comprised of two parts: both gender performance and accountability. Furthermore, according to West and Zimmerman, this “accountability” is a three-part system, comprised of accountability to self, accountability to others, and accountability to society (Hollander 2013). Due to these omnipresent structures of accountability, “doing gender” becomes compulsory; individuals are always accountable to socially constructed understandings of masculinity and femininity, even when they deviate from them.

This original “doing gender” model provides a useful framework for analyzing gender conformity, but it does not account for social change; as a result, some theorists advocate for a shift in focus away from how gender is done to how it might be “undone” (Butler ; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009) or “redone” (West and Zimmerman 2009). According to Deutsch (2007), gender is undone during interactions that have become gender-neutral. Risman (2009:83) adds that gender is undone whenever the “essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged.” However, West and Zimmerman (2009) disagree that these recent shifts

in gender norms reflect the undoing of gender; rather, they suggest that these shifts signal the *redoing* of gender — gender still exists, albeit in a less restrictive form.

It is important to note that this “un/re/doing gender” debate is not just about people’s accountability to masculine and feminine ideals; it is also inherently about people’s accountability to the gender binary itself. This leads to the following question: what does un/re/doing gender look like for people who do not identify as men or women? To answer such a question, sex is an important analytical category. As Dozier (2005:314) explains:

Sex is a crucial aspect of gender, and the gendered meaning assigned to behavior is based on sex attribution. People are not simply held accountable for a gender performance based on their sex; the gendered meaning of behavior is dependent on sex attribution. Whether behavior is defined as masculine or feminine, laudable or annoying, is dependent on sex category. Doing gender, then, does not simply involve performing appropriate masculinity or femininity based on sex category. Doing gender involves a balance of both doing sex and performing masculinity and femininity.

Indeed, while holding someone accountable to gender ideals, strangers first make assumptions about that individual’s sex. Messerschmidt (2009:86) adds the observation that “during social interaction, we see ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as an inseparable, seamless whole, and this is why incongruity produces a cognitive dissonance in us — for which masculine girls (and feminine boys) often get punished.”

### Doing Transgender

Moments of incongruity can be especially dangerous for trans individuals, whose very existence challenges society’s investment in the sex/gender conflation (Vidal-Ortiz 2009). In fact, trans individuals sometimes trigger “gender-panics,” which Westbrook and Schilt (2014) define as frantic reassertions of the naturalness of a male–female binary. This reaction is especially common when trans individuals enter spaces that are designated “women’s only” (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). On the other hand, sometimes people fail to notice sex/gender incongruities, due to their unwavering belief in the categories’ natural conflation. For example, pregnant transmen in Dozier’s interview sample were amazed that they “passed” as fat men even when they were full term; they attributed this phenomenon to their possession of beards, which people interpreted as an invariable marker of maleness (Dozier 2005; West and Zimmerman 2009).

As a result of trans individuals’ unique experiences within the sex/gender system, Vidal-Ortiz (2009) encourages sociologists to center them within the “doing gender” debate. In response, Catherine Connell (2010) proposes a separate analytical framework altogether called “doing transgender.” However, Connell does not distinguish between the experiences of binary and nonbinary transgender people within her sample while advancing the “doing transgender” framework; this oversight unfortunately obscures the potential differences between binary and nonbinary transgender

experiences within society. Furthermore, the umbrella term “transgender” is itself misleading. Indeed, Transgender Studies scholars have noted a significant rift within the transgender community, between those who desire to “pass” as men and women and those who reject the gender binary altogether (Namaste 2000; Roen 2002). And yet, those who wish to “pass” have come to represent everyone under the “transgender umbrella” within medical (and academic) models of transgender identity; these transnormative accounts problematically erase transgender diversity (Johnson 2015).

This study advances Connell’s (2010) “doing transgender” framework by highlighting how nonbinary members of an online community attempt to achieve their gender, given the confines of interactions within the binary gender system. This testimony about “doing nonbinary gender” reveals some strategies that NBs utilize to negotiate their binary accountability.

### Doing GQ?

Although there is little extant qualitative research on nonbinary particularities, survey data indicate that such research is necessary. For example, the 2008 National Transgender Discrimination survey revealed a number of important differences between the experiences of nonbinary transgender people – referred to as genderqueer or GQ<sup>1</sup> in this study – and their binary transgender counterparts (Harrison-Quintana et al. 2015). Perhaps most importantly, GQs were more likely to have been assigned female at birth and to identify as transmasculine. They were younger than the binary respondents, slightly less likely to be white, and less likely to live in the Midwest and South. They had significantly higher education levels than their counterparts, yet slightly more of them lived on \$10,000/year or less. They experienced higher rates of harassment during K-12 and 16% of them experienced sexual assault at school (compared to 11% of the binary respondents). The vast majority reported antitransgender bias at work, yet they were more likely than their counterparts to be “out” in the workplace. They were also more likely to avoid medical treatment out of fear of discrimination, experience harassment by police, and experience physical assault. Finally, and of extreme significance to this study, GQs were more frequently “misgendered,” which for them amounts to being treated as a man or a woman.

Factor and Rothblum’s (2008) survey highlights additional details about differences between binary transgender and GQ (the most commonly listed nonbinary identity) respondents. Most GQs in this sample were also assigned female at birth and most identified their sexuality as queer or bisexual. They were more likely than their binary counterparts to be attracted to lesbians and less likely to be attracted to heterosexual people. GQs were also more likely to talk about their birth sex with new cis friends, students, and teachers; however, they were significantly less likely to report certainty that their gender was known by their family. Additionally, GQs reported that strangers rarely perceive their gender accurately (compared to male-to-female and female-to-male respondents who marked “often”).

Finally, an online survey conducted by Kuper et al. (2012) lends even further insight into the diversity that exists under the transgender umbrella. Again, GQ was the most commonly listed gender identity among respondents; however, when given the option to select multiple gender identities, it became clear that most of the respondents actually identified with more than one gender. Moreover, this survey revealed the temporal nature of gender and sexuality identities. In the past, respondents identified with binary gender categories (man or woman) and binary-inflected sexuality labels (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual). However, in the present, most GQ respondents identify with nonbinary sexuality labels, such as pansexual and queer.

These surveys provide a rare and valuable glimpse into the particularities of GQ experiences, but they are difficult to interpret due to the lack of qualitative literature on the subject. Moreover, they raise a number of important questions. What does it mean to do gender beyond the binary? Under what conditions is this “doing” successful? When it is successful, does it contribute toward the undoing/re-doing of binary gender? These are important questions to ask if gender scholars wish to understand the regulatory impact of binary accountability.

## METHODS

In search of answers to these research questions, I turn to one place where NBs gather *en masse* to discuss and practice the logistics of gender achievement: the Internet. Virtual spaces are particularly important resources for those who study geographically disparate or hard to reach populations, including — but not limited to — Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer groups (Alexander 2002; Ashford 2009; Campbell 2004). Scholars have noted that online communities provide a “safe space,” or a Goffmanian “back space,” where marginalized individuals can acquire support from one another and develop their sense of collective identity (Hillier and Harrison 2007; Smith, Wickes, and Underwood 2015). For these reasons, I selected virtual ethnography as my method to learn more about the challenges that NBs encounter while attempting to achieve their gender. In order to respect users’ privacy, I selected a forum that encourages anonymity among the users; therefore, quotes cannot be traced back to individuals, so much as anonymous user names (Hine 2000).

### Reddit

For my field site, I selected the public GQ community on Reddit because “genderqueer” was the most commonly listed nonbinary identity in the extant literature. Although Reddit is lesser known than Twitter and Facebook, it is one of the top ten visited sites in the United States (Alexa 2017). Known as “the front page of the internet,” Reddit is a virtual bulletin board of user-submitted text, links, photos, and videos. Although it was only launched in 2005, Reddit had drawn 36 million

users from 215 countries by December 2015, attracting 786 billion monthly Reddit views (Reddit 2016). In relative terms, this is approximately the same amount of users as Tumblr and around half the amount as Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram (Alexa 2017). The majority of Reddit users are white non-Hispanic men<sup>2</sup> between the ages of 18 and 50; unfortunately, there is no demographic data on the particular GQ community under analysis (Pew Research 2013). Nevertheless, it is likely that discussions within this community reflect “white normative” experiences of the GQ identity (de Vries 2015; Ward 2008).

I selected Reddit as my ethnographic site because it arguably enables richer user interactions than other sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Open Facebook groups that are dedicated to the GQ identity are comprised primarily of memes and links to articles, with minimal interaction among the members. Twitter is also less than ideal for an ethnographic study due to its 140-character limit per tweet and the unidirectional nature of Twitter following. In contrast, Reddit enables users to share lengthy personal posts, images, video clips, and links to external content. Reddit also fosters a sense of intimacy through “subreddits,” groups that are dedicated to particular interests or identities. Each page within a subreddit includes twenty posts in blue hyperlink text, accompanied by numerical subscript that indicates how many replies, “upvotes,” and “downvotes” it has garnered from fellow users (“upvoting” increases a post’s visibility and “downvoting” decreases its visibility). This function is important within the GQ subreddit because it enables group members to decrease the visibility of “trolling,” or the gratuitous posting of inflammatory content. This democratic process also enables people to hold each other accountable to the group’s norms and values.

In other words, Reddit qualifies for ethnographic study because the interface fosters virtual communities. Parks defines “virtual community” as a space that enables the ability to engage in collective action, ritualized sharing of information, patterns of interaction that grow from information exchange, cohesion and positive sentiment, and attachments to one another and to the community more generally. Indeed, the creator of the GQ subreddit explicitly encourages “redditors” to conceptualize it as a welcoming community within the page’s mission statement. Below this statement is a list of LGBTQ-friendly subreddits and links to support resources for the LGBTQ community, followed by the affirmation “*You are loved. Smile, the world needs it.*” This framing appears to be effective. Users report an awareness of the site as a community space. For example, users refer to “the people who are here,” “fitting into the community here,” “safe space,” and so on. Several also articulate their emotional dependence on the group as the only space where they can interact with other GQs. As one member reflects:

I think we are actually entering a very fortunate time in human history, with the way technology and social media platforms are rapidly connecting people with others outside of their bubbles. It isn’t hard these days for any fish out of water to look online and realize there is a whole ocean of fish out there. I know I owe a lot of my journey of self acceptance to the likes of YouTube, Tumblr and Reddit.

Apparently, the GQ subreddit provides a backstage where otherwise isolated marginalized individuals can “try out one’s vaunted selves, and . . . [find] teammates with whom to enter into collusive intimacies and backstage relaxation” (Goffman 1959:206).

In order to analyze the main themes and discourses within this discussion forum, I selected 500 of the most recent threads in the Fall of 2015. I read the discussion threads several times, coding in three stages. First, I conducted an open reading of these discussion threads while taking field notes on emergent themes and key words. Next, I conducted open coding based on my field notes. Finally, I devised a categorical schema that encapsulated the main discourses and themes that I detected, which I present in the following sections: “Gender Identities,” “Gender Expressions,” and “Coming Out.”

The section titled “Gender Expression” includes two subsections: a discourse analysis of discussion threads and a content analysis of 28 “selfies” that were embedded within some of these discussion threads. These images cannot ethically be included within this publication because I did not acquire consent from the members of this public subreddit as part of my research design (Barker 2008). Therefore, I limit my use of this visual data to analytical descriptions of some aesthetic trends. It is important to note that the majority of these selfies (23/28) feature young white subjects; consequently, these trends do not necessarily reflect popular aesthetics among NBs of color or those who are older.

## GENDER IDENTITIES

Before we can understand how people attempt to “do gender” beyond the binary, it is important to understand how people conceptualize their nonbinary gender identities. Indeed, the meaning that a person ascribes to their gender label varies depending on their understanding of gender itself. For example, Valentine (2003) noted that transgender individuals employ a range of interpretations when discussing the meaning of transgender identity. Therefore, this section begins with an analysis of identity-themed discussion threads, in order to determine how the members of this community understand their gender.

Many people within this sample reference gender as a five-part model that includes masculine, masculine-of-center, androgyny, feminine-of-center, and feminine. Significantly, “masculine-of-center” was originally coined as a term for gender nonconforming people of color (Bailey 2014); therefore, the absence of any discussion about race suggests that these subreddit users have reframed this label beyond its initial racial context. Within this five-gender framework some also refer to themselves as “weak masculine” and “weak feminine,” as in “I feel mostly agender, somewhat genderfluid between weak female and male identities.”

However, not everyone conceptualizes gender as a five-part model. Another contingent discusses gender as a three-part model, comprised of men, women, and an “other” category that contains everyone else: “I feel masculine a lot of the time — but

my biggest struggle is that I'm genderqueer and transitioning isn't a viable option for me because I am BOTH, NONE, and ALL genders. Sometimes at the same time." Some others identify as bigender. In this case, the binary model remains intact, but the halves cease to be mutually exclusive and therefore the sex/gender conflation becomes inapplicable: "my male side is me, and my feminine side is me. They can be intertwined or completely separated." Others understand their gender as fluid or a spectrum: "you don't need breasts to be a woman, and you don't need bulging muscles to be a man. Gender is a spectrum, challenging the status quo is empowering, confusing strangers is a riot." Some identify as agender, and/or maintain that everyone is the same gender: "I identify as genderqueer because my mental response to 'I am a man' and 'I am a woman' is the same: just a blank with no words." Finally, some identify with all genders simultaneously, as in: "I'm just a big mish mash of gender at this point." Although all of these people come together within the GQ subreddit, it is clear that they do not share the same understanding of this gender label's meaning.

Furthermore, some are unsure whether they identify or qualify as GQ, so they turn to the subreddit for clarification, asking questions such as "How do I know if I'm femme presenting nonbinary or just regular ol bisexual cisgender?" and "Am I Genderqueer? Please Help!" The general consensus is that anyone who feels uncomfortable with binary identity categories is nonbinary by default; however, whether or not that makes them GQ is a matter of debate. This is because "genderqueer" is but one of the several popular nonbinary identity categories/labels; others that members invoke include agender, aliagender, androgynous, bigender, demigirl/demiguy, genderfluid, genderflux, genderfuck, gender variant, intergender, neutrois, polygender, and pangender. While some maintain that the different nuances matter, others understand these subcategories of nonbinary gender identity to be essentially interchangeable; therefore, they identify with multiple labels simultaneously (Kuper et al. 2012).

Another contingent within these discussion threads voices ambivalence about the GQ label due to its inclusion of the word "queer." This is because they associate the word queer with political connotations and/or queer sexuality, neither of which apply to them. As one member explains, "I feel genderqueer is almost like a political statement against gender, which is cool and I can totally get behind, but my own identity is something I'm exploring and developing for my own personal comfort and sense of self." Another member within this same discussion thread distances themselves from the queer label by explaining, "My gender is not 'queer.' I just don't have one." Yet, despite their ambivalence toward the GQ label, these individuals nevertheless participate within the GQ subreddit. In order to account for this heterogeneity within this virtual community, I refer to these individuals' experiences and interactions as "doing nonbinary gender" for the remainder of this article, instead of "doing genderqueer." This rhetorical shift acknowledges "nonbinary" as the umbrella term under which GQ falls.

Finally, it is apparent that — despite their inclusion within Connell’s (2010) “doing transgender” model — not all NBs identify as transgender. Indeed, the subreddit’s contributors voice considerable ambivalence about whether being GQ/nonbinary automatically entitles them to the “transgender” label. As one person explains, “I am usually cautious of using this term because it’s associated with both binary trans, and the whole narrative of hormones + surgery, neither of which apply in my case.” This hesitance results from the binary misconception that being transgender means being a transman or a transwoman, to which NBs are evidently held accountable. When exposed to such transnormative discourses, some begin to question whether they are “really” trans, despite their self-identification as such: “I’m nonbinary/genderqueer and genderfluid, and I spend at least half my time wondering if I’m not trans enough to call myself trans. Which is stupid! There’s no such thing as ‘trans enough.’” This is an important finding, given Connell’s inclusion of GQ individuals within her “doing transgender” framework; indeed, if some NBs feel uncomfortable with the “transgender” label, it seems more accurate to analyze their experiences within a specific “doing nonbinary gender” framework. Furthermore, it is worth questioning whether NBs can even “do transgender” according to the interactionist model, if their claim to the transgender label is not recognized by others. Rather, it might be more accurate to say that NBs “redo transgender” by raising awareness and visibility of categories beyond transmen and transwomen.

These discussion threads about the GQ identity trouble the original “doing gender” framework by highlighting the fact that not all people have internalized a sense of binary accountability. In fact, some do not experience themselves as gendered at all. If the “doing gender” model constructs accountability as a three-part system that includes internalized accountability, then it is important to note that this last component does not apply to many NBs. In other words, by rejecting the gender binary as a natural and inevitable referent, NBs redo gender — at least within themselves.

## GENDER EXPRESSIONS

Of course, there is more to being nonbinary than looking nonbinary, but gender displays are integral to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) original “doing gender” model. According to this interactionist formulation, people remain accountable to others’ gender reference points. Therefore, the successful achievement of gender is dependent on others’ recognition of that gender, a process which is oftentimes guided by visual cues. The issue for NBs is that strangers often miscategorize them as masculine girls or feminine boys because they do not recognize nonbinary gender when they see it (Messerschmidt 2009). Such instances of “binary misgendering” can be especially problematic for individuals within this sample who experience gender as subjective:

I don’t really feel like I have a single, well-defined gender, because people don’t seem to agree on what my gender is. I.e. most people see me as male, some people at least temporarily see me as female, and some people see me for the complex

mix of things I actually identify as. But like is any of these objectively true? I dunno . . .

This begs the question: how do NBs visually convey their gender identity, so as to achieve their desired gender attribution?

### Discussion Threads

Again, it appears that there is no one answer to this question, given the diverse gender identities within this sample. Some wish to evade binary gender attribution in keeping with their GQ or androgynous identities; others wish to “pass” as one gender on one day and another on the next, in keeping with their “genderfluid” identities; and others do not feel a need to visually convey their nonbinary gender at all. However, regardless of the desired effect, the GQ subreddit provides a space where individuals can share strategies with one another, ask questions, and get feedback on their “success” (however they define it).

There are numerous aesthetics that subredditors utilize in order to problematize binary gender attribution. One approach is to opt out of the binary through androgyny, a presumably genderless<sup>3</sup> display that is achieved through clothes such as T-shirts and jeans. Another approach is to strategically mix gender cues:

I personally try to achieve a lot of “center of center” effects by picking articles of clothing that cross a gender boundary away from my assigned birth sex (male), but then somehow do it in a way that “comes back” towards it. Examples would be, I often wear an outfit with skirts or leggings, but then the color scheme would be drab earth tones, more typical of colors men tend to wear.

Unlike the androgynous example, this GQ person strategically highlights the incongruity between their sex category and gender expression, by mixing feminine clothing with a masculine color palette. Both of these aesthetics produce a visible third gender category that resists binary classification and thereby contributes toward the redoing of gender. Simultaneously, both aesthetics undo gender by troubling the assumed inevitability of binary gender classification: as one androgynous person explains, “Everyday someone can’t tell what I am is a good day.”

However, not all NBs aim to evade binary gender attribution. Rather, some strategically utilize the rules of binary gender attribution in order to move between the binaries: “Today (wearing black jeans, a binder, and a button-down shirt) I got ‘gentleman’ once, four ‘sir’s’ and one ‘ma’am.’ Which is pretty good on average!” NBs such as this one guide strangers’ attribution process by strategically displaying binary gender cues. These genderfluid strategies highlight the fact that NBs are not all passive victims of the naturalized gender binary; rather, some actively exploit it as a tool for gender mobility. In other words, such NBs strategically “do gender” or even arguably “do (binary) transgender” in order to achieve their nonbinary gender identity.

## Selfies

These discussion threads about gender expression occasionally included selfies of the original poster ( $n = 28$ ). People post selfies to this subreddit in order to get feedback from sympathetic others about their gender expression, requesting viewer feedback, such as: “Gender me?” and “Do I look AMAB or AFAB to you? Be honest.” These posts reflect another function of the virtual space as a backstage arena for the similarly stigmatized to collectively prepare for offline interactions. Responses abound, with compliments on the person’s look and with gentle suggestions for aesthetic alterations, such as “maybe the makeup is a bit off?” These selfies reveal a number of visual trends that NBs have cultivated in order to interactively achieve their desired gender attribution.

Some frame their selfies as attempts to evade binary categorization, such as one that is captioned: “Embracing my androgyny.” Many of these individuals — including those who self-identify as assigned male at birth (AMAB) and assigned female at birth (AFAB) — signify their nonbinary identity through a particular haircut that mixes binary gender cues. Although subtle variations abound, this hair style appears to simultaneously feminize those who are AMAB and masculinize those who are AFAB. This style tends to be short-cropped or buzzed on one or both sides and/or in the back, with longer hair on top/in the front. The longer hair on top/in front is often dyed a bright color and styled. Those who keep this forelock shorter use gel to style it upward; those who keep it longer wear it swept to the side, framing their face. Some AFABs combine this hairstyle with menswear or a “grunge” flannel look, with or without binders, in order to achieve a masculine-of-center look. Some AMAB individuals combine this hairstyle with heavy makeup and high heels, with or without feminine clothing, in order to achieve a feminine-of-center appearance. In other words, NBs redo gender through this haircut, by incorporating stereotypically feminine and masculine styles into a new style that is symbolically nonbinary. In fact, one individual captioned such a selfie with the following explanation: “So I tried short ‘guy’ hair and hated it. I tried longer ‘girl’ hair and liked it better but not the best. Then I tried a compromise <3.”

Another binary-thwarting trend among AMABs within this selfie sample is to contrast their facial hair with feminine gender cues (high heels, makeup, and dresses). However, it is important to emphasize that this aesthetic is not an option for those who have dysphoric relationships with their facial hair, as one person explains: “Body hair makes me want to actually die. I’m in the middle of laser for my facial hair, which has made some things better.” Electrolysis is evidently an option for this individual, but this is not necessarily the case for those who struggle financially, or for those who wish to retain their ability to present masculine on one day and feminine on the next.

Finally, some contributors post selfie compilations of themselves presenting as feminine, masculine, and/or neither. A comparative analysis of these images suggests that these individuals strategically invoke the same binary gender cues that Goffman (1979) noted in *Gender Advertisements*, in order to achieve mobility within the

gender binary system. Goffman observed that — in the pursuit of a gender-idealized affect — women tend to avert their eyes, tilt their heads, bend one knee, place hands on hips, and otherwise contort their bodies into arrangements that look unsteady; in contrast, men tend to gaze directly into the camera with legs separated, and arms either crossed or loose. Similarly, when dressed in “women’s clothes,” selfie subjects within this sample tend to place one hand on a hip, jut the hip outward, and cock a knee, and hold their head slightly to one side; in contrast, when dressed in “men’s clothes,” these same individuals assume a wide-legged stance and refrain from smiling. Some people explicitly indicate that they are intentionally cultivating masculine or feminine aesthetics in captions that accompany these compilations, such as: “My masc/femme contrast.” Therefore, one could argue that they are strategically “doing gender” as a method of “doing nonbinary gender.”

## COMING OUT

In addition to these visual cues — or sometimes in lieu of them — some NBs clarify their gender identity through the process of “coming out.” Although coming out is not unique to the nonbinary demographic, the interactive process is a little different for NBs than for binary transgender people or gay and lesbian people. When NBs come out, they are simultaneously tasked with educating the public about the fact that there are more than two genders. This is difficult because, as one person shares, “all of my friends think nonbinary is not real.” In order to achieve gender recognition, NBs must directly confront their accountability to the gender binary during these interpersonal interactions. This anticipated burden can prove prohibitive toward coming out for NBs, depending upon factors including the person’s particular gender identity, their intended gender display, and the circumstances of the particular interaction.

The nonbinary coming out process never ends, as one redditor explains: “I see coming out as a slow, gradual, bumpy, choppy, and ongoing process . . . something without a clear beginning and definitely with no clear end . . .” This is because the assumption of a naturalized gender binary is so entrenched within society. Of course, other groups (such as butch lesbians and binary transgender people) who cannot “pass” encounter similar journeys due to their frequent experiences of misgendering (Halberstam 1998; Maltz 1998). However, some NBs within this sample sense that their experience of coming out is relatively difficult, due to the public’s lack of awareness about gender diversity compared to sexual diversity:

Genderqueer isn’t something we can trust society to handle right now, because they’re not even good to the binary trans people. So those of us who feel it’s not safe to be out aren’t coming out of nowhere. The thing to keep in mind is that this time for us is akin to a generation ago for gay people.

According to this person, hope is on the horizon. In the meantime, NBs are tasked with explaining the social construction of gender every time they wish to correct an

instance of misgendering. As a result of this significant and never-ending educational burden, some do not bother to come out at all beyond social media groups such as the GQ subreddit.

Although many in the subreddit accept misgendering from strangers who they will never see again, it is much harder for them to accept misgendering from family members. However, some worry that their families will not understand, or that their previous coming out episodes have filled some sort of quota. As a result, some only come out to select family members, which produces field-contingent outness within extended family networks: “I am out to part of my family but not all.” This field-contingency can make family gatherings emotionally distressing, especially if family members who are “in the wise” pressure the person to remain closeted for the sake of family harmony: “Essentially my extended family all try to ignore my gender as if they don’t know or try to shame me into not revealing that information about myself to my younger cousins.” Within discussion threads about this dilemma, members disclose various methods of coping that range from accommodation to protest to withdrawal: “I get drunk and hang out with the pets.”

Additionally, when it comes to sexual partners, members of the community convey a sense of obligation to come out. This process is particularly intimidating because heterosexual and homosexual partners may no longer wish to be with the person once they come out as nonbinary. Indeed, subredditors share accounts of relationships that ended because the partner was not willing to redo or undo their sexual identity in response to this identity disclosure (Brown 2010). Ward (2010) has similarly noted that partners of trans individuals must undergo significant interactive shifts in order to support the transition process, and not all consent to do so. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that the range of partner reactions varies; some are so supportive of the person’s transition that they join the GQ subreddit in order to learn more and get advice. Such partners initiate discussion threads such as “I want (NEED) to be better at respecting my androgynous partners pronouns” and “Girlfriend might be genderqueer? Looking for any suggestions to help me support her!”

## Pronouns

Finally, one other mechanism through which NBs come out is through alternative pronoun specification, though not all NBs prefer gender-neutral pronouns. In fact, some reject pronouns altogether, requesting that they be referred to by their full name or simply as a person/human. Of all the alternative gender pronouns, “they/their/them” is the most popular among the members of this community, though some favor other pronouns such as *ze/hir*, *ve/vir*, or some other nonbinary pronoun. People have different reasons for preferring “they/their/them” to the alternatives. As one subredditor explains, “I personally use they pronouns. They’re easy to remember, for me and others, and I feel like they are probably a little less confusing than pronouns like *zi/xi*.” Others opt for using they/their/them as a singular gender-neutral pronoun because it is already a pronoun with which English

speakers are familiar; additionally, some favor “they/their/them” because it is plural and they identify as possessing multiple gender identities.

Regardless of the reason for their preference, many who prefer “they/their/them” voice frustration about society’s hostility toward their pronoun preferences. This hostility is usually based on grammatical propriety or the effort it would require to change linguistic habits: “I have a hard enough time having people using ‘they/them/their.’ My mom argued for the longest time that she wouldn’t use them because she ‘wouldn’t change her grammar’ for me.” The GQ subreddit provides a space for individuals to strategize responses to this hostility, such as how to teach people about the social construction of language. Of course, NBs’ reactions to verbal misgendering vary: some accept it; others selectively correct those with whom they regularly interact; and another contingent corrects everyone, including strangers. It is important to note that not everyone feels safe disclosing their pronoun preference, nor do they routinely have opportunities to do so. Regardless, alternative pronoun disclosure is a unique and significant mechanism through which NBs challenge society to redo gender to include more options.

## DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

This virtual ethnography of the GQ community on Reddit aimed to answer three questions: How do people attempt to do gender beyond the binary? Under what circumstances does nonbinary gender become recognizable—and thus successful—according to the interactionist model? Does this doing of nonbinary gender contribute toward the redoing or undoing of (binary) gender? In summary, it appears that there is no one way to “do nonbinary gender” because the identity category functions as an umbrella for a host of gender identities. Indeed, depending on their particular gender identity, NBs “do nonbinary gender” differently. Some manipulate normative gender displays in order to “pass” as the desired binary gender; in a sense, this contingent “does nonbinary gender” by strategically “doing binary gender.” In contrast, those who desire nonbinary gender attribution from strangers “do nonbinary gender” by subverting normative scripts of gender display/linguistics and by educating the public about gender plurality; these processes contribute toward the redoing of gender to include options beyond man and woman.

In some ways, these interactive processes fit within Connell’s (2010) framework of “doing transgender.” However, in many ways binary transnormativity limits NBs’ ability to do their gender authentically. Indeed, it appears that NBs are held accountable to binary misconceptions of transgender during their interactions with others and even within their own internal dialogues. Due to this binary accountability that they experience within the transgender identity category, some NBs reject the label altogether. Therefore, it may be more accurate to say that NBs are not “doing transgender,” so much as they are *redoing* transgender, by expressing themselves in a manner that challenges these transnormative scripts. In other words, perhaps NBs

do not simply “do gender” or “do transgender” so much as they challenge binary accountability within both scripts by “doing nonbinary gender” as a unique interactive process unto itself.

Finally, according to the interactionist model, NBs can only succeed at “doing nonbinary gender” if others recognize it. Although misgendering and discrimination are still daily occurrences, it is important to note that there is also some evidence in these discussion threads that a social shift is beginning. Indeed, some members of this community report instances of strangers who resist labeling them as “he” or “she” if they are not certain, or who ask for pronoun clarification. Subredditors also share articles with one another about institutions that have begun to acknowledge gender plurality. For example, certain toy stores such as Target and Amazon have removed gender assignments from toy categories; Facebook now enables users to write in their gender label instead of picking male or female; *The Washington Post* now recognizes “they/their/them” as a gender-neutral singular pronoun option; and *The LA Times* recognizes “Mx.” as a gender-neutral prefix alongside Ms., Mrs., and Mr. Although these changes remain field contingent, it is apparent that institutionalized gender ideology is beginning to shift in recognition of NBs’ existence.

There is still much more work to be done toward understanding the particularities of nonbinary experiences. The strength of this virtual ethnographic method is the rich textual interaction among users, supplemented by the visual data that the selfies provided. However, as an outsider to the nonbinary community, I am limited in my ability to interpret the data. I am also limited in my ability to analyze differences based on race and ethnicity due to the lack of demographic data about this subreddit. Future studies should utilize other methods, such as interviews, in order to identify racial contingencies of nonbinary experiences. Future studies might also elaborate upon the interactional differences between AFAB nonbinary/transmasculine individuals and cisgender women who are regularly mistaken as men, such as butch and stud women.

Moving forward in this academic endeavor to theorize the undoing and redoing of gender, scholars must hold ourselves accountable to the nonbinary demographic. Studies that focus exclusively on power differences between binary gender categories (such as men, women, and occasionally transwomen and transmen) render nonbinary individuals invisible. In order to theorize social change, the re/un/doing gender debate must evolve beyond the binary framework. Nonbinary gender evades definition by its very nature, which is why its potential to redo gender is so considerable; however, its ability to enact change remains conditional upon its recognition by others, including gender theorists.

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## NOTES

1. Riki Anne Wilchins (1997) was one of the first to use the term genderqueer, in the book *Read My Lips*.
2. The nonbinary population is not given an appropriate gender option in this survey, so it is difficult to make meaning of this statistic as it applies to the members of the genderqueer subreddit.
3. It is unclear whether any visual cues can ever truly be androgynous, given that femininity is often achieved through decorative details that androgynous clothing lacks.

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