



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES
OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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**EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF NON-BINARY
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	1
LIST OF TABLES.....	4
LIST OF FIGURES.....	5
ABSTRACT.....	6
ABSTRAK.....	7
CHAPTER ONE.....	8
INTRODUCTION.....	8
1.0 Introduction.....	8
1.1 Background of Study.....	10
1.2 Problem Statement.....	12
1.3 Research Objectives.....	14
1.4 Research Questions.....	14
1.5 Research Framework.....	15
1.6 Significance of Study.....	15
1.7 Definition of Terms.....	17
1.7.1 Non-Binary.....	17
1.7.2 Challenges.....	17
1.7.3 Coping.....	17
CHAPTER TWO.....	8
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	19
2.0 Introduction.....	19
2.1 Lesbian, Gay, Transexual, Queer (LGBTQ+) Community.....	19
2.2 The Concept of being Non-Binary.....	21
2.3 The meaning of being non-binary.....	25
2.4 Challenges of non-binary in the Clinical Diagnosis.....	27
2.4.1 Challenges in the educational setting.....	29
2.4.2 Psychological challenges faced by non-binary.....	30
2.5 Intervention strategies of non-binary.....	32
2.6 Biological factors of non-binary identities.....	33
2.7 Theory.....	35
CHAPTER THREE.....	37
METHODOLOGY.....	37
3.0 Introduction.....	37

3.1 Research Design.....	37
3.2 Research Participants & Sampling Criteria.....	38
3.3 Instruments.....	39
3.4 Pilot Study.....	40
3.5 Data Collection Procedures.....	41
3.6 Data Analysis Procedures.....	42
3.7 Ethical Issues.....	43
3.7.1 Informed Consent.....	43
3.7.2 Confidentiality.....	44
CHAPTER FOUR.....	437
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	45
4.0 Introduction.....	45
4.1 Demographic Information.....	45
4.2 Findings.....	45
4.2.1 Theme 1: Experience as a Non-Binary Individual.....	45
4.2.2 Theme 2: Challenges as a Non-Binary Student.....	45
4.2.3 Theme 3: Coping Strategies.....	45
CHAPTER FIVE.....	537
LIMITATION, IMPLICATION, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION.....	57
5.0 Introduction.....	38
5.1 Discussion.....	56
5.1.1 Experience as a Non-Binary Individual.....	56
5.1.2 Challenges as a Non-Binary Student.....	58
5.1.3 Psychological Impact and Mental Health.....	60
5.1.4 Coping Strategies.....	61
5.2 Biological Factors.....	62
5.2.1 Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory.....	63
5.3 Recommendation.....	64
5.4 Limitations of Study.....	65
5.5 Conclusion.....	66
REFERENCES.....	67
APPENDIX A.....	77
APPENDIX B.....	77
APPENDIX C.....	81
APPENDIX D.....	85

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Step-by-Step Thematic Analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006)	43
Table 2	Demographic Information	44
Table 3	Overview of themes and subthemes	47

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Research Framework	15
Figure 2	Experience as a Non-Binary Individual	47
Figure 3	Challenges as a Non-Binary Student	50
Figure 4	Coping Strategies	53

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the challenges and coping strategies of non-binary university students. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of non-binary individuals in higher education settings. Key findings reveal that non-binary students faced a range of challenges, including lack of institutional support, conservative apprehension and gender invisibility. However, they also employ various coping strategies such as surrounding themselves with supportive networks and engaging in self-care practices. The insights gained from this study contribute to the growing body of literature on gender diversity and offer practical implications for universities to better support non-binary students.

Keywords: non-binary, university students, challenges, coping strategies, qualitative study

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka cabaran dan strategi digunakan oleh pelajar universiti yang tidak berbinari. Melalui temubual mendalam dan analisis tematik, kajian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan pemahaman yang menyeluruh tentang pengalaman individu yang tidak berbinari dalam persekitaran pendidikan tinggi. Penemuan utama mendedahkan bahawa pelajar yang tidak berbinari menghadapi pelbagai cabaran, termasuk kekurangan sokongan institusi dan kebimbangan konservatif. Walau bagaimanapun, mereka juga menggunakan pelbagai strategi seperti mengelilingi diri dengan rangkaian sokongan yang positif dan melibatkan diri dalam amalan penjagaan diri. Wawasan yang diperoleh daripada kajian ini menyumbang kepada peningkatan literatur mengenai kepelbagaian jantina dan menawarkan implikasi praktikal bagi universiti untuk lebih menyokong pelajar yang tidak berbinari.

Kata kunci: tidak berbinari, pelajar universiti, cabaran, strategi penanganan, kajian kualitatif

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In the strive towards a more inclusive and fair educational environment, it is important to recognize and comprehend the diverse experiences of university students. This includes those whose identities goes beyond the conventional boundaries of gender binary. In this chapter, the researcher will explore the lives of non-binary students by delving into the challenges they faced and the coping strategies they employ in order to navigate their university life.

The umbrella term for these community of people are called “genderqueer” or “non-binary” genders. Schudson and Morgenroth (2022) also describes that non-binary identities are normally categorized within the larger transgender spectrum that includes gender and sex identities being different from the gender linked to the individual’s birth-assigned sex. Regardless, non-binary individuals have diverse ways of defining their identities with some non-binary individuals who don’t consider themselves transgender, but rather cisgender (a term for when an individual’s gender matches the sex they were born with) or when they are neither transgender nor cisgender (Schudson & Morgenroth, 2022).

The basic foundation in understanding what non-binary individuals are, is the declaration of autonomy and the freedom to define their own identity. It is a statement about how they identify with their gender and overall feelings about it. Non-binary identities is not a new trend, however it transcends time itself as various cultures acknowledges the existence of three genders surpassing the ordinary binary. According to Britannica (2023) there are several cultures that recognizes a non-

normative gender identity. For instance, the Bugis ethnic culture in South Sulawesi, Indonesia that recognizes three genders (*Calalai, Calabai and Bissu*) where the gender roles and gender identity interplays with each other. With *Bissu* being the third gender that embodies a wholeness of femininity and masculinity. Accompanied by a long history in its own culture, the emergence of non-binary is simply a reflection of a universal cultural and societal shift towards greater comprehension of gender diversity.

As per a monitoring report by the Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) in 2017, the assessment of LGBTIQ rights in Malaysia found an absence of gender recognition across the country. This has systematically affected trans and non-binary individuals, leading to various consequences such as a lack of specific data, discrimination, and this results in them being denied the right to live with dignity, and they also face significant restrictions in accessing services, opportunities, and information. The report, concentrating on LGBTIQ individuals in Kuala Lumpur, Perak, and Terengganu, offers substantial statistics on the experiences of transgender, gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, but there is notably less information available for non-binary persons.

Subsequently, a study report conducted by SUHAKAM (2019) surveyed 100 respondents in the educational institutions aged 18-39 found that more than half of the respondents expressed discomfort with the binary nature of school uniforms, and concerns regarding toilets were raised due to gender identity. The study further highlights that there is no reliable systems in school that transgender children trust to address the unique challenges they face.

This study aims to have a greater comprehension of the experiences of non-binary university students, recognizing that discussions about their challenges and coping

strategies are equally as important for their story to be heard especially in the academic setting. Although there is a quite a bit of research on transgender individuals, recognizing their experiences and challenges, there has been limited research to understand the needs and experiences of non-binary students.

1.1 Background of Study

In psychology, there is a concept called the identity development model that helps show how individuals with specific identities go through their development. This includes gender identity, where transgender, binary and non-binary individuals are seen as part of one community. These community of people perceive themselves to be not exclusive to the female and male gender. Richards, et al., (2016) further describes that they might identify themselves as a combination of both female and male gender simultaneously, as distinct genders at various points in time, as having no gender at all or might challenge the traditional concept of being only two genders.

The concept of gender has undergone an extreme transformation, especially coming from decades of generation that portrays the rigid categories of what comprises of a female and male. According to Roselli (2018) gender identity refers to an individual's self identification on the female and male sex, manifesting in the way they dress, the way they behave and other various aspects of their life. Similarly, the American Psychological Association (2011) defines gender identity as the internalized perception that the individual holds about their sense of self; whether it aligns with being male or female, or another identity and this perception can either be the same or different from their biological sex. Typically in our daily lives, gender identities relies on the concept of masculinity and femininity. Conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity raises questions like "what are the qualities that makes a

person appear masculine or feminine?” or “ what are the actions linked with being masculine and feminine?”.

In Malaysia, an individual's gender is connected to their biological sex. However, their sense of gender identity is shaped by different things such as family traditions, religious belief, cultural background, and societal norms. In order to confirm this statement, a research was done by Hashim, et al., (2011) to understand and investigate students' construction of gender identities through several gender related task and questionnaire. It was concluded that the students understood the concept of gender roles and what is associated with being masculine and feminine. Their mindset portrays that their knowledge about gender started at home and at other institutions (religion and environment). Hence, nurturing practices at home influences the gender biases and it leaves an impression on an individual's sense of gender (Hashim, et al., 2011). Based on this statement alone, children at a young age are taught on how to conform to physical expectations of being female or male. From play activities that are strictly guided by gender roles with girls involving in domestic plays and boys in tougher play creates a blur in the non-binary community.

For many students, entering college and being a university student allows for freedom of expression. In college, individuals are able to restart and rejuvenate, escaping from the close-minded environment they grew up in. This is because many higher education institution worldwide recognize and offers a gender affirming environment rather than high school. Moreover, students would only begin to question and explore their gender identity in college due to its affirming environment. As Beemyn, et al., (2005) supported that college is the initial chance for young adults to explore, question and actively challenge their assigned gender, especially if they are living independently away from their family for the first time. However, in the context of

Malaysian university the progress for gender affirming environment is still behind. Based on Lim, et al., (2018) having a negative societal perception on an individual's LGBTQ identity can have detrimental effects especially at the institutional level in Malaysia where discriminatory laws and non-inclusive policies occur in the LGBTQ community. Therefore, this study will explore the experiences, challenges and coping strategies of non-binary university students in Malaysia.

1.2 Problem Statement

There is a growing awareness of LGBTQ+ issues in Malaysia, with increased advocacy efforts contributing to a more comprehensive understanding on gender and sexual identities. Despite that, there is a noticeable gap in the current research concerning the experiences, challenges and coping strategies of non-binary university students in Malaysia. The existing literature lacks a comprehensive exploration on the psychosocial issues faced by this community in Malaysia. Researchers emphasize on these aspects because by not addressing all these, it leaves non-binary individuals vulnerable to various challenges including inequality, biases, and societal stigma. The consequences of these challenges will all lead to diminished self-esteem, mental health issues and even the risk of suicide for this community (Anderssen, et al., 2022). Therefore, in this research paper the researcher will explore non-binary students of various background on their experiences, challenges and coping strategies in their university life. The impact of gender-based discrimination, microaggressions, identity concealment and the lack of inclusive policies on the psychological well-being of non-binary students is still unknown.

Additionally, according to Golderberg and Kuvalanka (2018) there is less research on non-binary individuals experiences in college as it relies on a small sample size. To

counter this research, Alexander (2023) conducted a study on the experiences of non-binary students in the public mid-southern University of Sunnydale and found that there is a lack of gender-affirming environment in the campus. While there are limitations to his study, he suggested future research to have a more racially/ethnically diverse sample size of non-binary students. In many asian societies including Malaysia, where the intersection of culture, religion and societal norms plays an important role in shaping one's identity, non-binary individuals may experience additional complexities in expressing their true self in the university setting.

Consequently, based on Linley and Kilgo (2018) gender-neutral for online systems are one of the examples of oppressions by institutionalized systems of binary thought within the higher education setting. In order to develop a safe environment within higher education institutions, it requires a comprehensive understanding on these issues. Thus, by recognizing the experiences of non-binary university students and the need to foster a supportive academic environment, it can help universities to refine their support system and educational practices to cater the needs of non-binary students. With this study, it can promote inclusivity and celebrate the resilience of non-binary individuals within the academic setting.

Further, the SUHAKAM monitoring report in (2019) pointed out some research gaps. These include the absence of detailed data on individuals who don't fit into traditional gender categories because of the lack of official recognition. There's also a lack of diverse and detailed information due to the invisibility of queer women and non-binary individuals.

Additionally, there's limited documentation on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and non-binary people, as well as trans individuals, especially outside

of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. The report relied mostly on interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and non-binary individuals to fill in the information gap.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To explore the meaning on being a non-binary student.
- To identify challenges faced by non-binary students.
- To determine the coping strategies of non-binary students in navigating their university life.
- To identify the contributing factors of non-binary identities.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What is the meaning of being a non-binary student?
2. What challenges does a non-binary student goes through in their university life?
3. What is the coping strategies of non-binary students in navigating their university life?

1.5 Research Framework

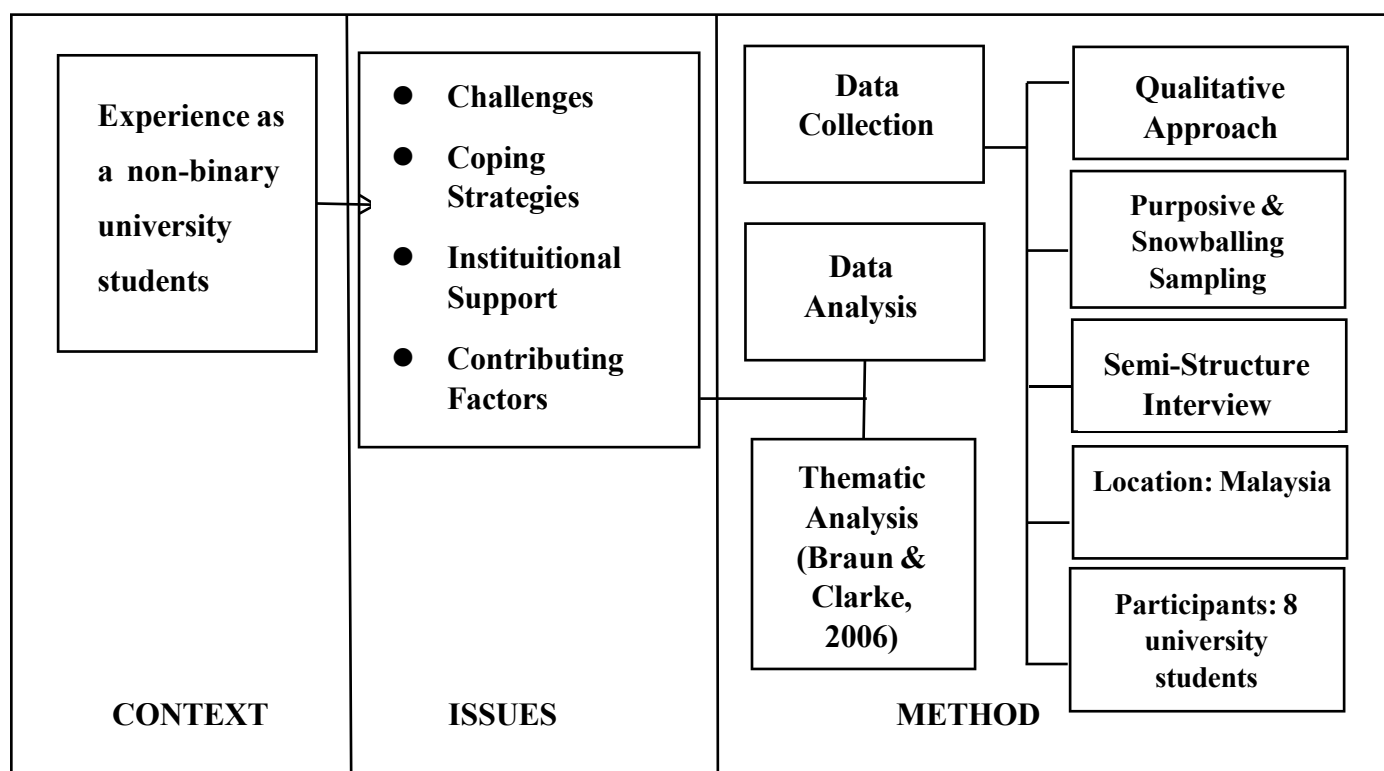


Figure 1: Research Framework

From the context of non-binary university students, the researcher will focus on the experiences of non-binary student in the university setting, challenges faced by non-binary students and the coping strategies that non-binary student employ in the university setting.

1.6 Significance of Study

This study is essential as it provides knowledge to the readers and clarity for the participants in this research. This study is beneficial for the participants as it provides a platform for them to voice their experiences and challenges. By recognizing their resilience, it allows for an opportunity for their stories to be heard, validated and

acknowledged. Thus, this study will help empower their self-esteem and self-advocacy, helping them to navigate their young adult life in the university.

Furthermore, it can help improve the psychological well-being of non-binary students. With challenges such as discrimination and oppression, it could take a toll on one's mental health. Buchanan (2011) categorizes oppression on non-binary individuals as microaggression and defines a microaggression as frequent verbal, behavioural or environmental slights and insults that are intentional and unintentional, it conveys feelings of hostility and negativity towards a targeted group. Therefore, the results gained from this research can guide not only the university but also peers in providing mental health resources and support towards non-binary students, which ultimately can improve their overall well-being.

Additionally, this study can also aid to promote inclusivity within the educational setting. Fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance towards non-binary students improve the academic community with diverse perspectives and experiences of students. A culture that stands for inclusiveness will exhibit a safe environment for every student to express their true self.

Lastly, this study can equip educators, staff and students in the university with the knowledge and awareness needed to produce a supportive and affirming surroundings for non-binary students. This can include things like; respecting gender identities, applying correct pronouns and advocating for inclusive practices in the classroom.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Non-Binary

Conceptual Definition:

Scandurra, et al., (2017) describes ‘non-binary’ as individuals who with gender identity that do not fit into the categories of male or female in their gender system

Operational Definition:

‘Non-binary’ refers to someone who identifies as a mix of both male and female genders, a different gender, a flexible gender, or a gender identity that does not fit into the usual male-female categories.

1.7.2 Challenges

Conceptual Definition:

Based on the Oxford Online Dictionary (2023), a challenge is defined as a new or demanding task or situation that assesses an individual’s ability and skills.

Operational Definition:

In this study, the challenges of non-binary university students can be based on the difficulties that they experience in terms of their social and psychological.

1.7.3 Coping

Conceptual Definition:

According to Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), coping is characterized as the thoughts and actions employed to handle stressful internal or external situations.

Operational Definition:

In this study, the operational definition of coping is how non-binary university students overcome the challenges they faced.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the previous research related to non-binary university student's challenges and coping strategies. In addition, the research will discuss related model or theory in this chapter.

2.1 Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual, Queer (LGBTQ+) Community

The LGBTQ+ community is a vibrant group of people that has a diverse blend of identities. LGBT is an abbreviation utilized to describe individuals who chooses labels for their sexual or gender identity labels that make sense to them because these identities are complex and historically situated (Diamond, 2003; Russell et al., 2009). It encompasses a spectrum of sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. Rooting back as early in the 1950s, gender and sexual orientation were explored when the terms "lesbian" and "gay" were used to characterize individuals whose sexual orientation differed from societal norms (Drescher, 2015). As pro-queer studies emerged, the terms were expanded to include bisexuality, transgender, queer and intersex aiming to advocate against various forms of homophobia over time (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015).

Further, Westbrook and Schilt (2014) defines gender identity as how an individual would personally identify themselves; this includes being male, female, agender, bigender, gender fluid, gender queer. However, gender expression refers to the external expression on how someone chooses to present and be perceived in society. Additionally, an individual's sexual orientation pertains to which sex or gender an individual is attracted to; romantically or sexually (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Hence,

there are terms like pansexual, heterosexual, homosexual, homoflexible, heteroflexible, asexual and bisexual which reflects different patterns of attraction. LGBTQ+ stands for an inclusive umbrella term that unites individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and beyond. Thereafter, the addition of the plus sign to the abbreviation implies the integration of additional non-binary identities that might not be listed in the abbreviation (Grant, 2021). Over the years the acronym evolves from LGBTQ+ to LGBTQ2IA+ which stands for (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-spirit, Intersex and people of non-normative sexual and gender expression (Chazan & Baldwin, 2021). According to Tinoco et al., (2021) the addition of “2IA” reflects an ongoing commitment to recognize diversity within the community as they are a part of the oppressed and harassed.

In light of this, non-binary falls within the LGBTQ+ community as per definition above. Non-binary refers to a gender identity that does not conform to the conventional categories of male or female making them susceptible towards being oppressed and harassed. In a study done by Factor and Rothblum (2008), aiming to investigate both differences and similarities within these three identity categories of trans identities namely, male to female (MTF), female to male (FTM), and genderqueer found that the term “genderqueer” was utilized to describe participants who do not identify as MTF or FTM, based on self-identification language used by a majority (62.5%) of these participants. A total of 50 MTF, 52 FTM, and 64 genderqueer participants revealed that 28% of genderqueer participants preferred pronouns other than she/her or he/him and 79% reported to have gender fluid identity. In a similar study conducted by Kuper et al., (2012) which explored the preferred diverse identity terms used by participants provided a statistics that out of 292 trans adult, 72.3% preferred terms like genderqueer, non-binary, genderfluid, gender-

neutral, queer, femme, confused, transgender, cross dresser, two-spirit and bigender as a way to express themselves. Overall, both researches indicated that gender identities are dynamic and may shift over time, making it apparent that non-binary falls within the LGBTQ+ community as individuals often use a combination of identity terms to express their gender.

In recent times, there has been a noticeable change in attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ communities. For instance, in Southeast Asia, Taiwan has achieved a significant milestone by becoming the first Asian nation to legalize same-sex marriage in 2018 (Lee & Lin, 2020). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the subject of LGBTQ+ remains a sensitive matter as it touches upon ethical, cultural and religious considerations. Abdullah and Amat (2019) implies that certain sectors of society assume the belief that the LGBTQ+ culture will have repercussions on human civilization, family dynamics, health and education. To add on, same-sex marriage is deemed a criminal offense, subject to punishment under the Syariah laws and specific sections of the Penal Code, namely 377(A) and 377(B). Given that the official religion in Malaysia is Islam, it also explicitly prohibits sam-sex relationships (Abdullah & Amat, 2019). Consequently, discussions about LGBTQ+ issues are often considered taboo amongst Malaysians (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017).

2.2 The Concept of being Non-Binary

According to Matsuno and Budge (2017) the term “non-binary” encompasses individuals whose identity exist beyond the conventional categories of binary gender (female and male) as it describes someone who experiences both male and female identities at different intervals or does not identify with the specific gender identity altogether. Hence, individuals identifying as non-binary embraces various gender identity labes such as agender, gender-fluid, gender-queer, non-binary, gender non-

conforming and trans (Galupo et al., 2017). The term “non-binary” has its roots in the works of transgender and transsexual ideologies who challenged the traditional gender binaries.

Evidently, sources like the American Psychological Association (2009) coined that in the year 1990s onwards, the term transgender predominantly serves as an umbrella term that comprises of individuals who challenge societal norms and assumptions related to gender. According to Krause and Halkitis (2020), the meaning of being transgender comprises a variety of gender identities and expressions that goes beyond the notion that categorizes individuals strictly into one of two genders only. Gender identity refers to an individual’s internal perception of being male, female or a combination of both or neither. Meanwhile, gender expression is the extension of one’s gender identity, and it extends into the manifestation of their appearance, social roles and behaviours (Krause & Halkitis, 2020). In light of this information, the term “non-binary” can fall within the “T” (transgender) category of the LGBTQ+ community.

Subsequently, non-binary can fall within the “Q” (queer) category as well. This is due to the fascinating aspects of the LGBTQ+ community in its continual innovation in creating vocabularies and terms that effectively capture their gender and sexual identities. As an example, the term “queer” serves as an inclusive label for individuals within the gender and sexual minority spectrum. Based on the American Psychological Association (2015), the term “queer” is an umbrella term that includes all identities beyond the heterosexuality, cisgender norms and gender minorities. This can be supported through a study done by Mavhandu et al., (2023) where the term “queer” is favoured within the LGBTQ+ community due to its non-binary nature. Furthermore, Morandini et al., (2016) echoed that the term “queer” is appreciated for

its inclusivity and diversity and it avoids confining individuals to specific labels or groups. However, Stryker (2008) generalized that “gender-queer” and “non-binary” is constituted in the “T” (transgender) umbrella, regardless of the range of differing gender identity and development experiences.

Nonetheless, it can be concluded that non-binary can fall between the two categories of the LGBTQ+ community depending on the individuals as they create their own meaning of their gender identity while challenging the prevailing gender norms (Richards et al., 2016). These individuals are still included in the community as they faced some degree of discrimination. According to Nicholas (2018), to create and foster the development of harmonious community that ingrains sensitivity and respect, one must be aware of the inappropriate terms perceived by the LGBTQ+ community. The manner in which individuals identify themselves within this spectrum varies from one society to another and therefore making it crucial to comprehend preferred terminologies.

Notably, it is important to recognize the terms used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) to categorized individuals in the LGBTQ+ community. Earlier editions of the DSM such as DSM-II pathologize terms and classifications relating to homosexuality. The DSM-II published in 1968, listed homosexuality as a mental disorder under the “sexual deviation” category. Later on, in the DSM-III it introduces gender identity disorder by eliminating homosexuality as a mental disorder and it was no longer pathologized as it introduces the term “sexual orientation disturbance” as the diagnostic category. However, it was short-lived, and the DSM-III-R (Revised) was published in 1987 by replacing ego-dystonic homosexuality to “sexual disorder not otherwise specified”. With the recent publication of the DSM-5 in 2013, the category was replaced with “gender dysphoria”

as it aims to destigmatized transgender identities by focusing on the distress experiences by an individual due to the incongruence between their gender identity and assigned sex. This statement alone can be supported by De Cuypere et al., (2010) which emphasizes that the modification in criteria and terminology is less stigmatizing as it no longer suggests that an individual's identity is considered a disorder.

Moreover, continuing from the discussion of changes in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the destigmatization efforts, it is fitting to extend the discussion to Disorders of Sex Development (DSD) and the context of non-binary identities. In the Malaysian context where cultural, social and legal perspective on gender may differ, it is important to acknowledge the adversities surrounding Disorders of Sex Development (DSD) and the experiences of individuals who fall under this category. Disorders of sexual development (DSD) refers to a set of congenital conditions characterized by abnormal development of both internal and external genital structures (Witchel, 2018). Arboleda et al., (2014) stipulates that individuals with DSD may exhibit diverse physical characteristics ranging from unclear genitalia, lack of development of secondary sex traits, primary amenorrhea, hypospadias, clitoromegaly, to intricate congenital genital malformations. With this definition, the term *khunsa* has been used in Islam to refer to the discussion of DSD. Zakaria et al., (2021) defines *khunsa* as an individual who possess masculine facial features but displays feminine behaviour, or someone with dual genitals. Zakaria et al., adds on that in accordance with Islamic Law, a “khunsa” is described as an individual having both male (zakar) and female (farji) genitals and *khunsa* is classified into two groups; non-problematic/discernible (*khunsa ghayr musykil/wadhih*) and problematic/intractable (*khunsa musykil*). A non-problematic Khunsa is a person with

both male and female genitals, and their gender can be determined based on the development of secondary sexual characteristics or functional abilities, such as urination, ejaculation, menstruation, or breast development. For instance, if a person with both male and female genitals urinates from the penis, ejaculates semen, or grows facial hair, they can be identified as male.

Conversely, if the same person develops breasts and menstruates, they should be regarded as female (Zakaria et al., 2021). The development or lack thereof of these dual genitals can lead to physical anomalies in the body. On the other hand, the term "non-binary" is used in contemporary discourse to describe individuals whose gender identity does not strictly align with the traditional categories of male or female. Non-binary individuals may identify as a combination of both genders, neither gender, nor a different gender altogether. This differs from the concept of Khunsa in Islamic law, which is based on the physical characteristics and functional abilities of an individual with both male and female genitals. Therefore, while Khunsa is a classification based on the physical and functional attributes of individuals with both male and female genitals, the term "non-binary" pertains to a modern understanding of gender identity that transcends the traditional binary concepts of male and female. The two terms are distinct in their historical, cultural, and legal contexts (Uddin, 2017)

2.3 The meaning of being non-binary

Before noting the challenges of non-binary, it is essential to highlight the experiences of non-binary individuals. According to a systematic review done by McCann et al., (2021) spanning from January 2010 to January 2021, the objective was to thoroughly assess and incorporate available research findings concerning to the different psychological and social experiences of non-binary individuals. The aim was to

identify factors that can aid or delay entry to appropriate psychosocial interventions and supports. Notably, the systematic review involves non-binary individuals and delve into their psychosocial needs. The review found that there are four important experiences of non-binary individuals namely, the challenges with their gender identity, mental health challenges, barriers to healthcare and the psychosocial support needed. In an online article by Real Talk (2022), it presents real stories of transgender and non-binary individuals in Malaysia that highlights the struggles and confusion these community faced due to societal norms and gender expectations. Additionally, a report done by the Asia Pacific Transgender Network (2017), indicates that transgender individuals in Malaysia, including non-binary individuals faced systemic stigma, human rights violation and legal challenges, particularly within the context of the Muslim-majority society. The challenges faced by non-binary students include a lack of institutional support, feelings of exclusion and a lack of recognition of their gender identity. As stipulated by Harris et al., (2021), non-binary students often encounter a system that is not designed to accommodate their gender identity, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation. To add on, there is a general lack of awareness and support for non-binary issues among university students in Malaysia, which contributes to one of the challenges faced by non-binary individuals. Furthermore, the established writings primarily focus on the experiences of transgender students in Malaysian universities or the awareness of LGBTQ+ issues in Malaysia. This can be supported by studies like Sharifuddin et al., (2022) where the study collects consensus on the awareness of university students on the existence of transgender group around them. Similarly, Aziz and Halim (2020) conducted a preliminary study focusing on the challenges faced by transgender children in Malaysia found that transgender children in Malaysia need better support and understanding from their educational

system, especially in the context of Islamic sexual education. This suggests that there is a scarcity of dedicated research on the experiences of non-binary students within the Malaysian context.

2.4 Challenges of non-binary in the Clinical Diagnosis

In that respect, one of the many challenges of being non-binary is experiencing gender dysphoria. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-5), defines gender dysphoria as a distress that occurs when a gender identity of an individual is not aligned or coincide with the assigned sex. Based on the study done by Byne et al., (2018), while not all trans-individuals undergo gender dysphoria, it has historically been the primary clinical framework through which the transgender experiences is comprehended. Additionally, it is essential to comprehend that not all transgender experiences are the same as it depends on the gender identity, assigned sex and the approach towards social and medical transition of the individuals (Levitt & Ippolito, 2013) and the factors collectively influence how an individual may encounter or experience gender dysphoria (Galupo & Pulice, 2019).

In a study done by Galupo and Pulice (2021), amongst non-binary individuals aiming to understand their experience of gender dysphoria ranging from participants aged 21-45 years old, it resulted in the need to take action to create clinical evaluations and successful intervention for gender dysphoria. The study recognizes that (1) not all seek a strictly feminine or masculine appearance among the trans and non-binary individuals, (2) people prefer gender fluidity as the ideal presentation of themselves, (3) gender dysphoria is not static and has dynamics to it and lastly, (4) traditional methods of affirming gender might not adequately meet the unique needs of non-binary individuals. Moreover, based on the study done by Taylor et al., (2018) aiming

to comprehend the experiences and needs of non-binary individuals in gender identity clinics and seeking medical interventions, it was concluded that the challenges of non-binary individuals encounter as they try to align their personal identities with the constraints of available medical treatments, lacks acceptance in society. At its core, it could be beneficial to provide psychological support for non-binary individuals in navigating the limitations of current medical treatments. Hence, by creating a safe space for reflection of these challenges could aid non-binary individuals in addressing the difficulties of living outside the binary (Clark et al., 2018). The study provided emphasizes the importance of future research in acknowledging and understanding of these under-represented and diverse group of individuals.

Generally, when looking at gender dysphoria in the clinical lens, it mainly focuses on how someone felt about their body and if they were unhappy with it (Pulice et al., 2019). This would mean that the approach would often revolves around the idea of feeling like they are “trapped in a man/woman’s body” if it was from a transwomen perspective. According to Deogracias et al., (2007) models used to understand gender dysphoria is leaning to see gender as only male or female, as tools used to measure this often had questions and languages that assumed people are male or female based on their assigned sex at birth. However, many transgender and non-binary individuals don’t correlate with this as it does not capture the essence and experiences of gender dysphoria. For instance, Galupo and Pulice (2019) finds that those who identify as trans-feminine imply that these tools are more accurate reflecting their experience compared to those who identify as trans-masculine and that non-binary individuals are least likely to think these clinical tools truly capture what they are going through.

2.4.1 Challenges in the educational setting

Other than that, non-binary also experience challenges in regards to their educational setting. In a study done by Paechter et al., (2021) eight participants living in United Kingdom (UK) aged 13- 18 years old experiences little to no support from their school. This makes them hard to come out as non-binary in school as curriculum in the school is strongly binary. Educational institutions tend to adhere to binary structures (Bragg et al., 2018) and it is consistent with the broader binary norms present in the society (Jones et al., 2020). For example, gender classification in official paperwork utilized by schools, enforcing dress codes based on gender and gender-based facilities make it a challenge for students to come out and this practice transgress even towards the university setting (Davies et al., 2017). In educational settings, the existing institutional binaries have simultaneous impact on non-binary youth exposing them to feel unseen and hypervisible in school (Martino et al., 2020).

Another challenge that non-binary individuals face in the educational setting is the occurrence of bullying or discrimination by their peers. Atteberry et al., (2019) posited that transgender and non-binary (TNB) individuals face distinct challenges in school compared to their non-heterosexual and cisgender peers and as a result, the experience of TNB students remains under-explored. Due to feelings of unsafety, TNB students are more likely to be absent as specific facilities in school like the school toilet and locker room are identified as feeling particularly unsafe (Wernick et al., 2017). In a study done by Reisner et al., (2014), there has been an increased vulnerability to victimization such as violence, adversity, and trauma within the school environment. Additionally, these individuals are subjected to gender-based bullying, both in-person and online including verbal and physical attacks (Dessel et al., 2017).

To confirm this, a study to investigate the factors that impact the transgender and non-binary students' well-being was conducted by Kelley et al., (2022) revealing that there were various situations where participants' identities were either acknowledged or disregarded making discrimination a common experience for them. Consistent with the studies mentioned above, mistreatment from peers resulted in TNB students facing rejection, victimization and bullying. However, interestingly the study reveals that the actions and attitudes of adults in authoritative position has a more significant impact on their well-being. The participants of that study often mentioned the attitudes and behaviours of school staff, teachers and principals rather than those of peers. To support this, an earlier observation done by Singh (2012) construe that the behaviours of non-parental adults like; insufficient support, disregarding transphobic peer bullying, taking oppressive measures and neglecting negatively impacts the well-being of TNB students.

2.4.2 Psychological challenges faced by non-binary

Non-binary individuals who do not exclusively fall into the category as male or female constitute a significant and often marginalized segment of the population. In most cases, diverse gender identities that do not align with society's binary expectations are more prone to face challenges in being accepted and having the recognition they deserve. This has intensified the sense of acceptance towards their gender identity in the social setting. According to De Vries et al., (2015) adolescents and adults with gender diverse identities have reported mental health outcomes that are less favourable than of those in the general population. Aligned with this statement, a study done by Vaele et al., (2017) recruited a community of gender diverse youths across Canada aged up to 25 years old reveals that the findings

indicated that non-binary individuals reported higher mental health outcomes and higher instances of self-harming thoughts or behaviour compared to their binary peers.

Similarly, Thorne et al. (2019) shared results from a study involving 388 transgender youth, aged 16-25, who were receiving services at a gender identity clinic in the UK. The findings showed that non-binary individuals reported poorer mental health, including heightened levels of anxiety and depression, as well as lower self-esteem compared to their binary transgender counterparts. Those who do not conform to society's binary gender norms may face additional challenges in how they are perceived by others, presenting an extra burden that goes beyond the struggles experienced by binary transgender individuals (Jones & Mullany, 2016).

These challenges can be further supported in a study done by De Graaf et al., (2021) revealed that there is a consistent trend in both gender-diverse adolescents and adults seeking gender identity services; the more pronounced the identification as non-binary, the greater the reported psychological challenges. Additionally, the study inferred that the increased occurrence of psychological challenges in individuals identifying as non-binary could stem from external or internal factors or a mixture of both. According to Fiani and Han (2019), internally grappling with one's gender identity, especially if its not recognized can be inherently stressful because difficulties related to expressing their gender while trying to explore their gender identity at a later stage in life can be an overwhelming feeling as well. In addition to the absence of protective factors like social support and peer relationships, non-binary individuals might be more susceptible to internalized stigma as it entails them to align their self-concept with societal norms of gender (Levitan et al., 2019).

2.5 Intervention strategies of non-binary

Coping mechanisms plays an important role in navigating the difficult societal expectations of non-binary individuals. In a study done in by Chinazzo et al., (2022) recruited a total of 706 Brazilian adolescents and young adults to correlate coping strategies and quality of life revealed that, engaging in positive socialization or positive social support is an important element of their coping strategies. By spending time with family and friends that accepts them and volunteering in community events was linked to improved self-perceptions and quality of life amongst transgender youth. These findings indicated that positive social relationships serves as a protective factors for this community.

In a separate study by Chinazzo et al., (2021) it was discovered that there is a correlations between positive emotional relationships and reduced occurrence of depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts among transgender adults in Brazil. Despite the societal challenges and prejudice encountered, the findings highlights that socialization is an adaptive coping mechanism for managing overall stress.

Moreover, educational advocacy is one of the strategies non-binary individuals cope. This can be seen in the study conducted by Puckett et al., (2019) where exploration of various forms of discrimination faced by gender diverse individuals and the connection to symptoms of depression and anxiety correlates with the mediating impacts of coping strategies revealed that the sample size of 695 gender diverse individuals ages 16 years old and older employ education and advocacy as the most frequent form of coping used by participants. This is because raising awareness and advocating for inclusivity is important to understand their needs especially in the educational institutions and workplace.

In contrast with these positive coping strategies, a study conducted by Oorthuys et al., (2022) revealed that there was more diversity in the maladaptive strategies reported. One common maladaptive strategy was isolation, which many used to avoid confrontations, stigma and rejection. This involves different forms of isolation like staying away from social situations, keeping emotions to oneself, and avoiding communication. Hence, this often leads to feelings of loneliness and increased risk of depression. Coyle and Dugan (2012) states that social isolation as linking to feelings of not fitting in, difficulty connecting with others and neglecting relationships; all of which that leads to negative impact on mental health.

Lastly, apart from the common ways people handle challenges, the study by Oorthuys et al., (2022), reported that moderating factors of like having positive emotional traits like being optimistic and resilient, often went along with using a more helpful coping methods and thoughts. This matches the data reported by Hatzenbuehler et al., (2008) that young people in the LGBTQ community who has high level of optimism and resilience associated with the tendency to expect good things in the future and therefore uses effective ways of dealing with problems.

2.6 Biological factors of non-binary identities

The comprehension of non-binary identity formation involves several explorations of factors that includes biological, psychological and environmental settings. In order for an individual to identify as non-binary they are most likely inclined to be taught at a young age on the definitions of what is associated with being a female or male or develop gender traits through biological predispositions. Hence, in this section the researcher will highlight whether the biological factor contributes to the formation of non-binary identities and the environmental factor will be discussed in theory section.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), 2011, gender identity postulates the innermost perception of an individual's male, female or another gender identity that aligns or differs from their biological sex. The exploration of the biological aspects influencing the formation of non-binary identity is complex and evolving. In a review conducted by Roseli (2018), aiming to find the correlation between the neurobiology of gender identity and sexual orientation found that both gender identity and sexual orientation are shaped during development. It was suggested that exposure to testosterone before birth tends to make gender identity and sexual orientation more masculine, while the absence of testosterone tends to make them more feminine. This conclusion is based on studies with animals, measurements of androgen exposure indicators, and investigations into conditions linked to sexual development disorders. In light of this statement, it includes the need for thorough exploration and further understanding of the biological factor in the formation of gender identity.

Moving on to the biological contributors to gender trait development, according to Wilhelm et al., (2007), theory that suggested exposure to prenatal testosterone leads to "male-typical" development in gender has raised questions and it is now recognized that biological influences on gender development are more complex than previously believed, and there is no broad claim of direct causation between biological factors and gender development. Similarly, Joel (2021), stipulates that studies on animals show that testosterone affects various parts of the brain. However, both males and females have other hormones and genes related to sex that also influence brain structure. This complexity results in more differences in how different features align with typical male or female characteristics within a single brain, compared to what you would expect from just one factor. Consequently, Joel et al., (2015) simplified

that the notion of clear distinguishable male or female brain is too simplistic. With recent research that challenges these outdated studies by looking into and supporting the idea of a “mosaic brain”. This is discussed and supported by studies from Jordan-Young (2012) and Rippon et al., (2021), where it talks about how individuals have unique combinations of features that don't neatly fit into traditional gender categories. While there are indeed differences between male and female brains and behaviours, the mosaic brain theory emphasizes the overlapping and diverse nature of these characteristics within individuals.

2.7 Theory

Erik Erikson's psycho-social theory is a foundational framework in developmental psychology that analyses how humans navigate through eight stages of psycho-social crises across the lifespan. The researcher applies Erik Erikson's psycho-social developmental theory in order to understand the development of non-binary identities, emphasizing on how individuals negotiate their gender identities within the context of psychosocial challenges. The progression of identity development involves the establishment of one's identity, where the internal reality of the individual emerges, demanding expression as previous identifications are either discarded or undergo reconfiguration (Erikson, 1968). The researcher will focus on the childhood, adolescence and emerging adulthood stages of Erikson's theory with emphasis on the identity formation. Erikson (1968) highlights the presence of milestones across the entire developmental spectrum, from childhood through late adulthood.

Early interaction with caregivers and the surrounding environment provide children with knowledge about the world and society, influencing the way gender is taught.

According to Vygotsky (1978), individuals exist in culturally bound contexts, and research like Martin and Ruble (2004) explores the three phases of gender integration in children. Initially, the process begins in the toddler years when children start recognizing characteristics linked to specific gender identities, often leaning towards stereotypical traits. Subsequently, the second stage takes place between 5 and 7 years old, during which a child's comprehension of gender becomes more fixed. Lastly, in the third phase, starting at 8 years old or older, researchers observed a growth in cognitive flexibility regarding gender. Additionally, Halim and Ruble (2009) and Martin and Ruble (2004) posited that children's awareness of gender norms extends towards their hobbies and interest, influenced by societal expectations from an early age. Subsequently, Martin and Ruble (2004) found that children start incorporating gender-related information into their thoughts as early as 2 years old. However, when confronted with a deviation from gender norms, studies indicate that children may attempt to modify their peer's behaviour, make fun of them, or inquire about the individual's gender identity (Masters et al., 2020).

Next, adolescent years especially for non-binary individuals can face many challenges where their gender identity development becomes a focal point, this can lead to increased peer pressure to conform and hinders self-expression (McMillan et al., 2018). Emerging adulthood as described by Arnett (2000) involves ongoing identity formation in areas such as work, love, and worldview. Schwartz et al., (2013) stipulates that LGBTQIA+ individuals in the emerging adulthood period will explore their sexual orientation and gender identity. This exploration can often be facilitated by the exposure to new environments, like being in a university environment (Epstein & Ward, 2011). Notably, emerging adults carry the learned gender norms from

childhood and adolescence, but the exposure to new expression or norms may occur (Kuper et al., 2018).

Finally, those who are uncertain about their gender identity might have the opportunity to examine it during emerging adulthood. Past studies have highlighted the significance of being exposed to a variety of gender expressions and language, particularly for non-binary individuals (Kuper et al., 2018).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This section outlines the approaches employed to achieve the objectives of the study. It includes details about the research design, participants, pilot study, criteria for sampling, data collection procedures, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative research method is employed in order to support the approach of social constructivism in this study. According to Kim (2001), social constructivism emphasizes the dependence on particular assumptions such as reality, knowledge, and the process of learning. She further explains the theory suggests that individuals construct their own understanding based on their experiences and interactions with

others. The approach to social constructivism is linked with interpretivism, which emphasizes the meaningful aspects of individual's characteristics and involvement in both social and cultural aspects of life (Elster, 2007). Since this study aims to explore the experiences of non-binary university students, the collected information was interpreted personally and in detail by participants as they shared their experiences and background. The significance or interpretation of the data was wholly derived from the participants' narratives and was not influenced by the researcher's perspectives. This approach is the basics of the highly inductive nature of qualitative research, as outlined by Creswell (2014).

Furthermore, a qualitative method is suitable as it allows researchers and participants to articulate their experiences and emotions using their own words without hesitation. A qualitative method facilitates the exploration of questions that are not easily measured with numbers, providing comprehension into the human experience. By delving into the everyday details of a social phenomenon and studying the important questions as they happen in real life, helps us to learn and understand a person's situation better (Cleland, 2017).

Additionally, Creswell (2014) emphasizes that a qualitative method should have interview questions that are open-ended as it allows the participants to give meaning to their life stories from their perspective. Thus, the qualitative method enables the researcher to comprehend the subjective experiences of the non-binary participants.

3.2 Research Participants & Sampling Criteria

The sampling method of this study utilized a purposeful and snowballing sampling method. The purposeful sampling method in question is a non-probability sample

where only non-binary university students was recruited by snowballing. The intended sampling method aims to ensure that the sample is relevant to the research question strategically provided by the researcher. In the snowball approach, the researcher contacted referrals made by initial participants and use these referrals to establish relationships with relevant people to participate in the research. Researchers recruited eight non-binary university students as study participants. Non-binary is defined by Kandola (2021), as an individual who does not identify strictly as either a man or a woman. Instead, a non-binary person may articulate their gender identity and expression in a manner that transcends these binary classifications.

The inclusion criteria of this research are the participants who are:

- Non-Binary Identity
- University Student
- Consent to Participate

The exclusion criteria of this research are the participants who are:

- Non-Consent/ Refuse to give informed consent to the researcher
- Binary Gender Identification
- Non-University Enrolment

3.3 Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher themselves served as the instrument. According to Haven and Grootel (2019), the qualitative researcher plays a role as an integral part of the measuring instrument and holds significant influence in extracting data findings.

This is because the researcher actively engages in activities such as conducting interviews, transcribing content, and extracting information relevant to the study. For this particular study, the researcher developed guided questionnaires for the purpose of interview (see Appendix C) comprising questions related to Demography, Challenges, Identity, Coping Strategies, and Institutional Support. As outlined by Jamshed (2014), semi-structured interviews will be conducted based on an interview guide which is a structured presentation of questions or topics that the interviewer intends to explore. Jamshed further notes that the interview guide includes core issues and specific questions related to those central themes. Through this approach, the researcher aims to indirectly uncover additional information that may prove valuable to the study later on.

3.4 Pilot Study

To ensure the suitability and reliability of the interview questions before commencing the main study, a preliminary investigation, known as a pilot study, has been conducted. As indicated by In (2017), the initial phase of the overall research protocol involves a pilot study, typically a smaller-sized study aims at preparing and refining the main study. To execute the pilot study, the researcher selected one participant, whereas the actual study involves eight participants. The chosen participant responded to the interview questions, and upon data collection, an analysis has been conducted to assess the participant's comprehension of the questions. Additionally, the analysis focus on interpreting the depth of the participant's responses and their contribution to achieving the researcher's objectives. This process enables the researcher to identify sections requiring improvement and modification.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

This study gathered information about the experiences of non-binary university students, including the challenges they face and the strategies they use to cope. In collecting the data, a semi-structured interview has been conducted. Based on Jamshed (2014), a semi-structured interview involves comprehensive discussions where participants respond to predetermined open-ended questions, making them a commonly utilized method. Through this, it allows the researcher to find out the thoughts, feelings and experiences expressed verbally by the participants. The researcher utilized social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Reddit to look for participants who have all the criteria needed for the study. From the response that the researcher received from potential participants, eight participants who fit the criteria of the study have been chosen to be interviewed.

Before the interview, the participants were given an information sheet and informed consent form. The participant information sheet acts as an aid towards the participant in understanding the purpose and procedures of the study while the informed consent was to ensure the voluntary participation and understanding of the recording process.

Moreover, for the transcription of this research it will utilize an audio recording and video recording session in the interview as it facilitates accurate transcription. Audio recording is used so that the researcher could focus on participant's answer to come up with suitable follow-up questions. The interview session was recorded and transcribed into textual data. The recorded data has been deleted after transcriptions were completed.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

In this study, the researcher uses thematic analysis to analysed the data. A thematic analysis is a process of identifying patterns or themes within a qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Similarly, King (2004), highlights that a thematic analysis acts as a useful tool to summarize key datasets as it compels the researcher to adopt a well-planned approach to manage the data, ensuring that the final report is well organized. Thus, a thematic analysis was used by the researcher to view and make sense of the collective or mutual meanings and experiences by concentrating on context across the dataset. In a thematic analysis, there are six steps stipulated by Braun and Clarke (2006) to be followed in order for it to be a successful analysis:

Familiarization	➤ The first step to thematic analysis is to familiarize with the collected data. This requires researcher to be accustom with the data by transcribing, reading, re-reading the data and writing down main ideas.
Generate Initial Codes	➤ Start the coding process by identifying interesting features or patterns within the data. This can be done through open coding where initial code is generated without the preconceived categories.

Generating Themes	➤ Combining potential themes by gathering all the data relevant to each potential theme
Reviewing Themes	➤ Examining and refining the potential themes by reviewing the content to ensure it accurately represents the coded data.
Defining and naming themes	➤ Ongoing analysis is done to refine the existing theme.
Writing Up	➤ The final step acts as a last opportunity for the researcher to analyze. Compelling examples will be selected as the research will be associated with research questions and literature.

Table 1: Step-by-step Thematic Analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006)

3.7 Ethical Issues

3.7.1 Informed Consent

Adhering to the ethics of any research, the researcher has provided an informed consent form and participant information sheet. This is essential in ensuring that the participant's rights are protected, and it also confirms that the interview is conducted after ensuring the participants are fully informed about the goals and potential risks involved.

Further, explicit permission to record the interview has been obtained. If the participants refuses that the interview session to be recorded, then the participants will be considered under the exclusion criteria and therefore granting them the right to withdraw from participating if recording makes them uncomfortable or for any other reasons.

3.7.2 Confidentiality

The researcher has ensured the confidentiality of all study information including the background and data of the study. This commitment is made to prevent any intentionally or unintentionally disclosure that could endanger the participants. The researcher has access only to information relevant to the study, and it will be guaranteed that the obtained data has not been altered for personal us

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter includes demographic information of the participants and the findings from the semi-structured interviews of this study. To honor the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, their names are not their real names and do not reflect their true identity.

4.1 Demographic Information

Participant	Nini	Beau	Marshall	Iman	Adi	Lala	Tennie	Kira
Age	22 years old	23 years old	20 years old	19 years old	21 years old	20 years old	21 years old	24 years old
Residence	Puchong	Pulau Pinang	Kuala Lumpur	Gombak	Shah Alam	Shah Alam	Kuala Lumpur	Subang Jaya
Preferred Pronouns	He/she/they/it	They/them	He/she/they /it	They/them	They/them	She/he/they	They/them	They/them

University	University of Malaysia, Sarawak (UNIMAS)	University of Malaysia, Sarawak (UNIMAS)	Taylor's University, Kuala Lumpur	University Teknologi Mara (UiTM, Rembau)	Sunway University, Kuala Lumpur	Sunway University, Kuala Lumpur	Taylor's University, Kuala Lumpur	Management and Science University (MSU), Shah Alam
Program	Bachelor of English for Global Communication	Bachelor of Strategic Communication	Bachelor of Computer Science	Diploma in Mass Communication	Bachelor of Science (Hons) Psychology	Bachelor of Science (Hons) Marketing	Bachelor of Fashion Design Technology	Bachelor in Event Management

Table 2: Demographic Information

For this study, the researcher has interviewed 8 non-binary students from various universities in Malaysia. There are 3 assigned male at birth (AMAB) consisting of Beau, Adi and Kira and 5 assigned female at birth (AFAB) who are Nini, Marshall, Iman, Lala and Tennie. The table above shows the demographic information about the participants, including their preferred pronouns. All of the participants resides and studies in West Malaysia, except for Nini and Beau who are students in UNIMAS.

4.2 Findings

The study was conducted qualitatively through in-depth interviews with the participants. A semi-structured questionnaire was utilized to aid the researcher to achieve the research objectives. Among 8 interviews, 3 main themes and 7 subthemes was transpired through the data analysis. The participants shared mainly on their experiences as a non-binary individual, challenges of being a non-binary student and the coping strategies they employed:

Themes	Subthemes	Category
Theme 1: Experience as a non-binary individual	Positive aspect	➤ Personal clarity ➤ Liberation
	Negative aspect	➤ Lack of family support ➤ Self- concealment
Theme 2: Challenges as a non-binary student	Academic barriers	➤ Conforming to the binary environment
	Gender invisibility	➤ Usage of dead/government names in University ➤ Enforcement of binary gender norms

	Conservative apprehension	➤ Being afraid of conservative educators
Theme 3: Coping Strategies	Social support	➤ Friends and partner ➤ Online community
	Solitary activities	➤ Isolation

Table 3: Overview of themes and subthemes

4.2.1 THEME 1: EXPERIENCE AS A NON-BINARY INDIVIDUAL

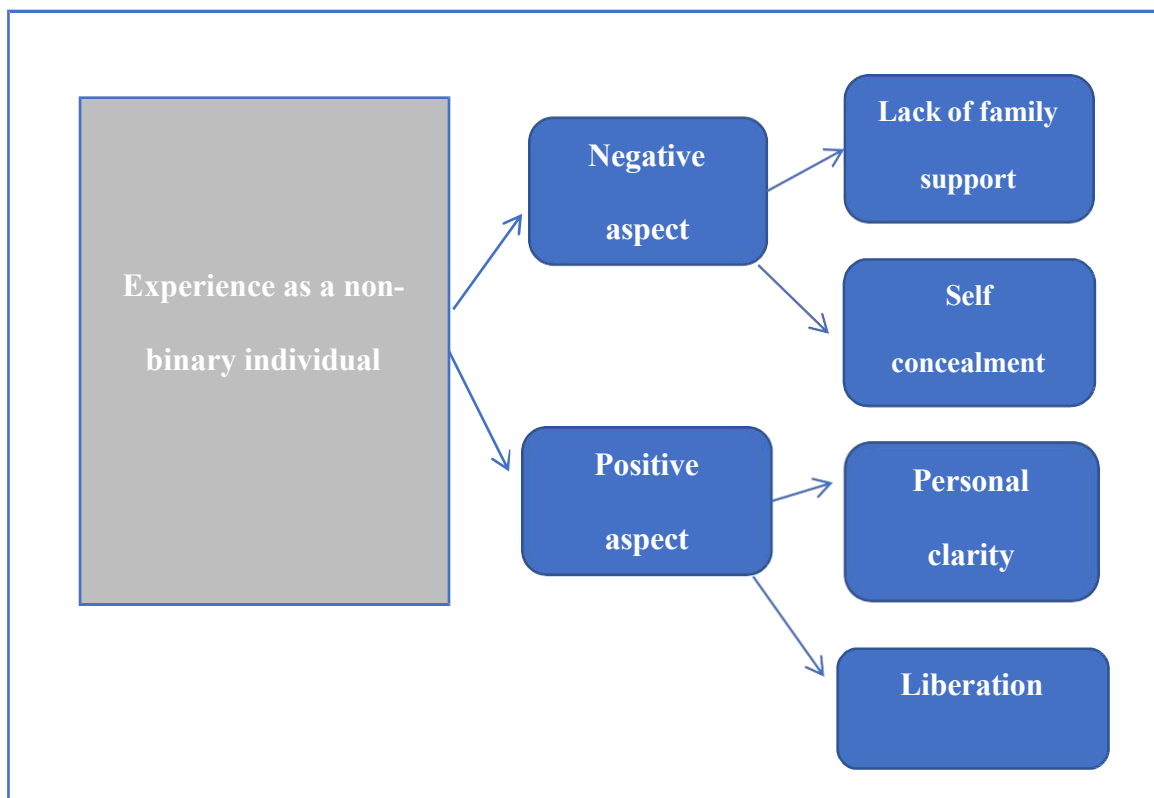


Figure 2: Experience as a non-binary individual

The participants articulate the positive and negative aspects of being a non-binary individual.

POSITIVE ASPECT

The participants shared that there are some positive aspects as to being a non-binary individual.

Personal clarity

The participants described experiencing a sense of personal clarity upon realizing their non-binary gender identity. This realization was often accompanied by statements such as “everything finally made sense” or an eye-opening experience as mentioned by Nini, Beau, and Adi:

For me, it was very eye opening because it made me realized a lot of things because I went through the normal stereotype of people who go through their whole girly phase and then tomboy phase and stuff like that..... it made me realize that I'm not binary and I actually like being referred to the other gender and it clicked that all those past experiences before defined me as such. (Nini)

But then, as I got older I started to realized that “when I think of myself, what do I think?”..... I'm like “I don't see anything” like there's no regard towards a gender binary. And for me, that was kind of like the stepping stone that made me realize that “oh I guess I am non-binary! That make sense now”...(Beau)

So I began searching things up online, I began talking with my friends about it. And I found out that I am non-binary and that all made sense. Being non-binary made more sense to me than feeling like I was trans, because I thought I was trans. Along the way, I discovered that I am non-binary and I am comfortable this way. (Adi)

Liberation

The participants shared that they feel liberated when they live authentically within their gender identity which involves the freedom to live and express fully and comfortably with the support of understanding communities as mentioned by Marshall, Adi and Lala:

So living authentically in my gender identity means presenting myself and being myself to the fullest around friends and chosen family members. (Marshall)

From feeling confused about who I am inside, to feeling relive that I finally knew what I felt inside to feeling comfortable in my own skin and body. I guess you could say that the experience was worth it. I would say it's been a long time coming since I've felt this content about myself. (Adi)

To me, being assigned female at birth felt not right, but neither did detaching myself completely from womanhood. Hence, the term "they" comes in, it was more to this feeling of confusion but at the same time, I was able to feel liberated from it once I finally know who I am. (Lala)

NEGATIVE ASPECTS

Lack of family support

The participants expressed the lack of understanding and acceptance from their parents prevents them from coming out to them as mentioned by Beau, Marshall and Iman:

I come from a catholic background and stuff...my parents are like...they're not aware of the idea of it and the knowledge that they have about gender identity and the meaning of being non-binary... Hence, they don't know about my gender identity and I don't think I would ever want to bring it up to them because they already have this preconceived notion of all these LGBTQ+ issues is. (Beau)

I don't think I will ever come out to them because they're very traditional and also because our relationship isn't really like that anymore. Like if we had remained close like my childhood until now, maybe I would've considered telling them. But I don't consider telling them and I don't see any reason to want to tell them that part of me. (Marshall)

As far as support goes, my mom took care of me most of my life and my dad wasn't around up until a few years ago. She married this other man and he's been supporting us ever since. That's how my support system goes and they only know that I like women and they weren't very happy about that. They don't know about me being non-binary and I will never tell them.(Iman)

Self-concealment

Other than that, the participants also face issues of self-concealment as they constantly have to hide their true selves around their family members as mentioned by Marshall and Tennie:

Of course, it's a constant struggle because I want to present how I want to present. It's just a constant stream of hiding lah. It's not like I want to hide these things from them, I guess it's just easier to hide it which has resulted in a lying habit. (Marshall)

Yeah it definitely is because not being able to share such significant part of myself not only feels lonely, but it's frustrating because I feel like I have to "hide" myself in a way... But a part of me still feels that something is missing when I go on about my day and they're not there to fully see me in a sense. (Tennie)

4.2.2 THEME 2: CHALLENGES AS A NON-BINARY STUDENT

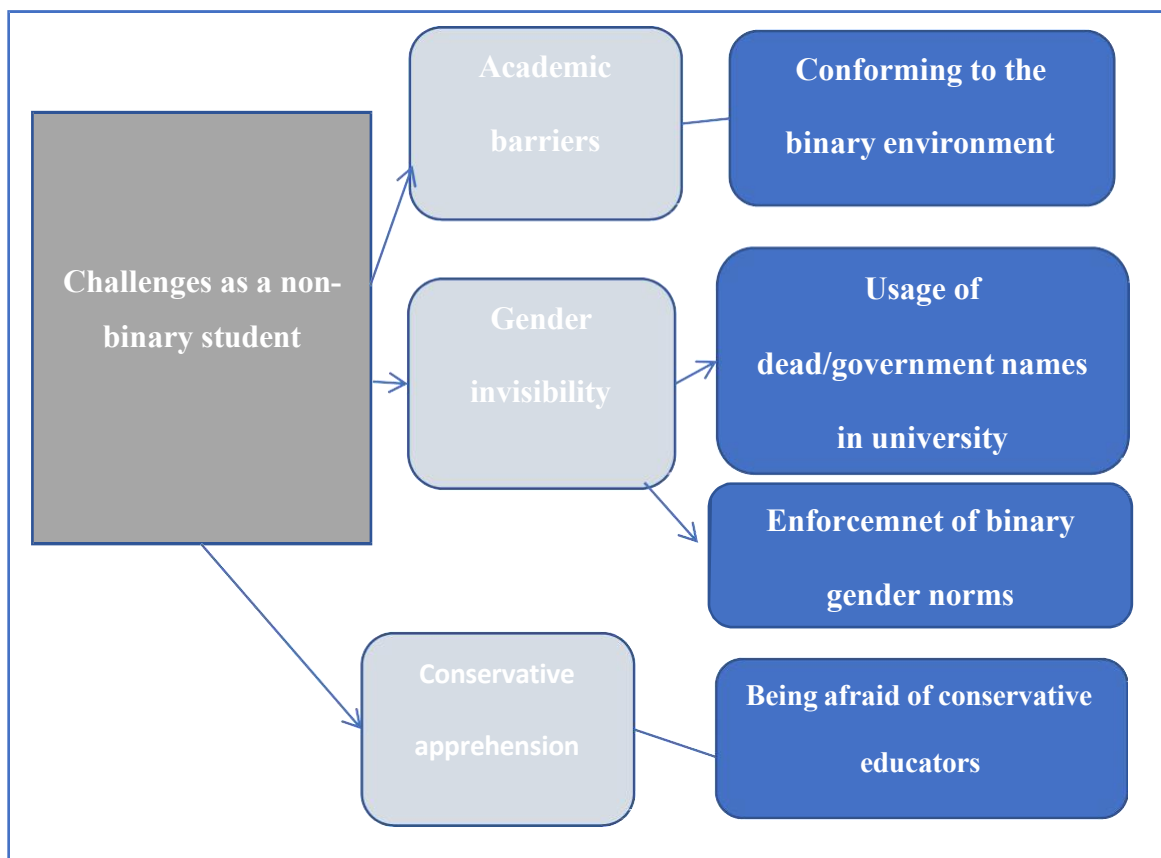


Figure 3: Challenges as a non-binary student

Academic barriers

Conforming to the binary environment

The participants face academic barriers when they are pressured to conform to binary norms and this could hinder their comfort and sense of belonging in an educational setting as mentioned by Nini and Iman:

I think this just also in general, but it's mostly because in university people usually tell me that I have to dress more femininely or like, I'm not dressing up even for presentations. To me, I don't like wearing baju kurung or in my traditional attire... They're just going to say I need to act like a girl and sit like a girl something like that. (Nini)

I would say dead naming and just being perceived and expected to do girly things just because you're a girl... it just sucks because I have to restrict myself to a little bit of this and in the end, I just resigned to it. I don't see it getting any better than this anytime soon, so I just go along with it. I conform when it is needed, I conform especially in uni, I conform around my mother and that's all I could do for now. (Iman)

Gender Invisibility

Usage of dead/government names in university

The participants shared that when educators or university personnel uses their dead or government name instead of the preferred names, it invalidates their identities causing them to have emotional distress and hinders the academic engagement as mentioned by Beau and Lala:

Having to put their name for example because there are non-binary people who don't use their government names anymore, they would use their preferred name. So having to use the assigned name given on their government IC could pose as a challenge to them because in uni, you have to put your government name. (Beau)

I guess the one nit-picky small thing would be using my government name. People close to me would call me by my preferred name which is Lala and lecturers or even classmates that are not close with me would call me by my government name. (Lala)

Enforcement of binary gender norms

Additionally, the participants shared that having the enforcement of binary understandings of gender pose as a challenge to them as it disregards their non-binary identities mentioned by Beau, Adi and Kira:

probably like the little nit-picky things like- you know how in academic settings you have to refer to people as “Mr” or “Miss” (I don’t know if it’s done today, maybe it changed now) but I know things like these can affect other fellow non-binary. (Beau)

But the small ones I would say would be the fact that I have to choose my gender when answering questionnaires or having to sit in the classroom where they assigned your seating for you. It’s not a big crime against non-binary students. But it would be nice to feel included and thought of for once. (Adi)

One of the challenges I’ve encountered is the lack of awareness and understanding of non-binary identities among both faculty and peers. This sometimes leads to misgendering or assumptions about my identity, which can be hurtful and invalidating. (Kira)

Conservative apprehension

Being afraid of conservative educators

Furthermore, the participants express their fear and anxiety around conservative educators as it may have the potential for passing of judgement and discrimination regarding their non-binary identity as revealed by Beau, Marshall and Tennie:

Another concerning challenge that I face is that I am a bit scared when it comes to more religious people within the university, like those religious lecturer and people and stuff.....I’m just worried about what they may say about me or do to me because sure I am not a muslim and I’m still “Catholic” so there is still somewhat of a danger that I can face if like they try to take action upon me for acting or expressing myself this way. (Beau)

But then, the biggest issue here is that there are surprisingly a lot of lecturers...lecturers who has a certain background for liberal studies and they start to project their own beliefs in the educational system. There has been times where they asked students to write essays and it’s very obvious that the teaching is traditional, very Islamic...the entire course was just the lecturer talking about trans people and just spitting

out nonsense saying that trans people are not women and all... I find that so weird and upsetting that even when the lecturer was reported, nothing was done about it because she's a permanent lecturer. (Marshall)

There was this instance where this educator would bring up topics like this for discussion or any topic relating to the LGBTQ community and you can see that the discussion of the topic was not very open...It's a challenge for me because I have to go through that and I'm the type of person who is shy, so even if I were to speak up about it, it would feel like I was the only "out" so there's a certain target brought upon me if I did not conform.(Tennie)

4.2.3 THEME 3: COPING STRATEGIES

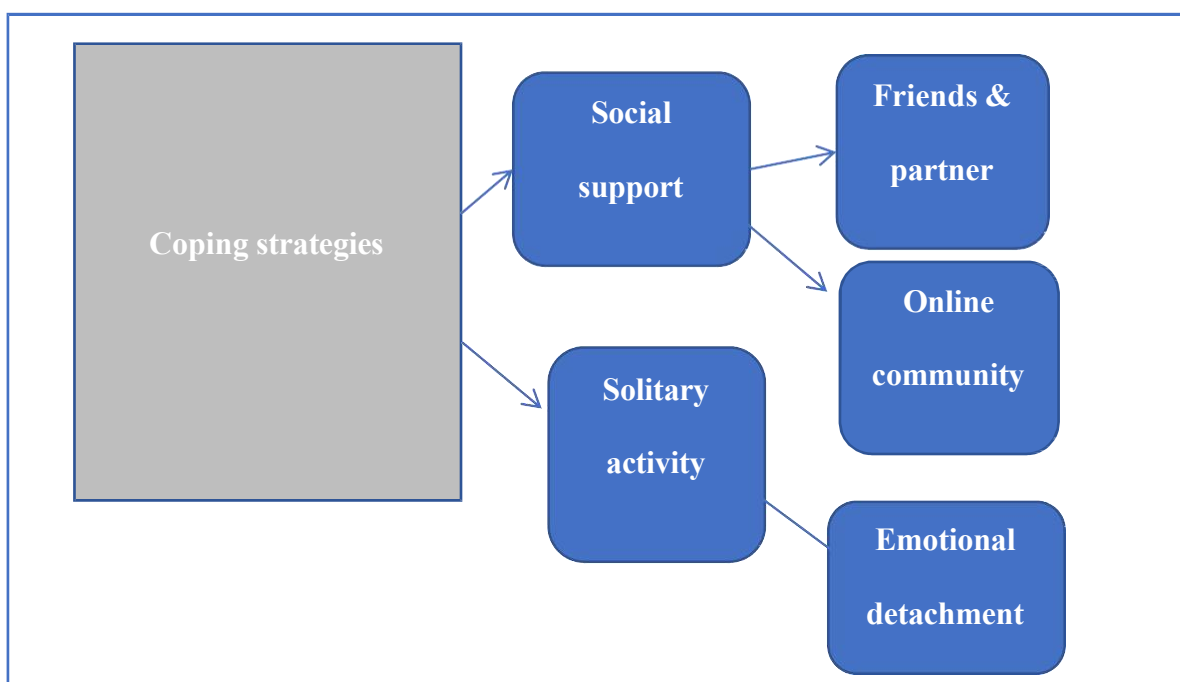


Figure 4: Coping strategies

Based on the analysis of the data, the researcher has identified the coping strategies utilized by the participants in maintaining their well-being when facing discrimination.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Friends and close partner

The participants shared that having friends who are queer or partners who are understanding of their gender identity creates a safe space for them to freely express themselves as mentioned by Nini, Beau and Iman:

Other than that, I have a partner and he is just cisgender and straight...So I constantly ask him like “is it ok if you were to refer to me as your partner instead as your girlfriend?” and he tells me all the time that he’s completely ok with it because he likes me and love me for who I am rather than the person he has in mind for me...that to me is my coping strategy. (Nini)

Oh yeah, well my friends because I was lucky enough to find like minded friends who are also queer and who are also non-binary and stuff and they’ve stuck with me ever since...We would have discussions about our identity, listen to each other vent and support each other and all those kind of things. (Beau)

My best friend, I love her a lot. She’s been a friend to me for half of my life and when I wanted to come out to her...she assured me by telling me that I’m her friend and that she loves me regardless of what I am... if it wasn’t for my friends, I don’t think I would explored my identity as nearly as much since all my other friends are queer.(Iman)

Online community

Besides that, the participants also shared that having online friends helps especially when it comes to learning and information sharing about their gender identity as mentioned by Marshall, Iman and Kira

It’s also experience sharing or reading other people’s experience through online. Websites like Reddit helps because it easier to share there. (Marshall)

I also join online community like in Discord where I have friends that supports me, joke around with me and also share their queer experience with me. They never tell me what I’m doing is wrong or saying things like “this is not our lifestyle” they just accepted me for who I am and I couldn’t be more grateful for that. (Iman)

If those friends are busy, I would turn to my Quora or Reddit community. I gained a good amount of interaction and followers there so get an instant reply back from there. (Kira)

SOLITARY ACTIVITY

Besides that, the participants mentioned that engaging in solitary activity can benefit the mental well-being of oneself. By being present in solitude with one's emotions, it would allow the participants to focus inwardly.

Emotional detachment

For instance, the participants acknowledges the power of the mind and embrace the practice of mindful solitude as highlighted by Adi and Kira

There has been times where I rather not talk about things to people and allow myself to be alone with my thoughts and if it gets too much, I'd reach out for help. (Adi)

Other than that, I have also been trying journalling and meditation as a means to feel calmer and to better cope with a difficult situation. Let's say if I were to be ridiculed or discriminated at a public space, I would just take a deep breath and walk away. I really hate confrontation that I know I will never win even if I tried. (Kira)

CHAPTER FIVE

LIMITATION, IMPLICATION, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research findings, the limitations of the current research and recommendations for future research

5.1 Discussion

The current study explored the challenges and coping strategies faced by non-binary students in the university setting. The literature review concentrated on the meaning of being non-binary, the challenges of non-binary in clinical diagnosis, challenges in the education setting and the coping strategies employed by non-binary university students.

5.1.1 Experience as a non-binary individual

Based on previous literature review in chapter 2, the experiences of non-binary university students emphasizes the need for recognizing, exploring and understanding the community. Real Talk (2022) an online community for the LGBTQ community presents real stories of transgender and non-binary individuals in Malaysia, highlighting the struggle and confusion they faced due to societal norms and gender expectations. Aziz & Ismail (2022) found that transgender and non-binary children in Malaysia need better support and understanding in the educational system.

To correlate these previous findings, current study have identified that just like any other experiences in life there are pros and cons towards it. Current study found that

the experiences of non-binary university students include; personal clarity, liberation, lack of family support, and self-concealment. The current study extends the research done by Gibson et al., (2016) in which challenges during childhood regarding their internal gender awareness did not match with their biological sex was a common thing, especially in non-binary and transgender individuals. In Gibson's study, many participants remembered demonstrating similar effeminate behaviours indicating their preferences for traditionally feminine activities. Thus, these stories, small moments and telling flags helped people make sense of their lives and showed a consistent gender identity over time. Similarly, Garrison (2018) found that non-binary and trans people told similar stories of lifelong gender non-conformity. One example from the current study would be, participants who are assigned male at birth (AMAB) refer to themselves as "flamboyant" at a young age while, participants who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) has always been referred to as masculine or androgynous. However, it does not necessarily correlate with their preferred pronouns as mentioned by most of them. In choosing to look manly a certain day does not correlate with their preferred pronouns being a "he" and vice versa. The term "they/them" is heavily emphasize and preferred to, as it brings a more inclusive meaning. Presently, the American Psychologist Association (2019) style manual recognizes the inclusion and usage of the word they/them/their as pronouns for situations where gender is unknown or irrelevant and it could include situations involving cisgender women or men. Conversely, in 2019, the American Dialect Society chose "they" as the word of the decade and "(My) Pronouns" as the word of the year. This shows two things: more people accept using "they" as a singular pronoun, especially for non-binary people, and people are using pronouns to show their gender identity, like saying "My pronouns are they/them." This means they want others to use "they" when talking

about them. At which case, in the current study it reflects the preferred pronounce being “they” for the participants.

5.1.2 Challenges as a non-binary student

In the current study, the participants faced several challenges in the university setting. The findings reveal four primary challenges extracted from the subthemes: 1) conforming to a binary environment, 2) usage of dead/government names, 3) enforcement of binary gender norms, and 4) being afraid of conservative educators. These findings both corroborate and challenge previous research and adapting it in the Asian cultural context. The current study found that the participants struggles with the binary structure of the university environment. It aligns with the research of Paechter et al., (2021) who mentioned that non-binary students experience little to no support from their educational institutions. Jester et al., (2016) stipulate that one reason for educational inequalities is that standard curricula are biased and are often created by mostly white, cis-gendered, heterosexual men who don't adapt quickly enough to social changes. The rigidity of the binary systems in educational settings as highlighted by Bragg et al., (2018) stipulates that creating an environment where non-binary students feel unseen and hypervisible simultaneously increase feelings of exclusion and alienation.

Contrary to this, some studies suggest that institutional changes are slowly being implemented to accommodate non-binary identities. This can be seen by Clarke et al., (2018) who advocates for the creation of a safe space for non-binary individuals to reflect on their challenges. However, the current findings in the study indicates that such spaces are not yet prevalent in many universities, particularly in conservative regions like Malaysia, thereby reinforcing the binary structure and it's associated

challenges. Additionally, the mandatory usage of government or dead names in university records poses as a significant challenge for non-binary students. This issue is deeply intertwined with the broader societal insistence on legal recognition of gender as mentioned by Davies et al., (2017). The requirement to use government names that often do not align with non-binary gender identities, contributes towards their sense of invisibility and misgendering. Current study extends the work of Reisner et al., (2014) who highlighted the increased vulnerability to victimization among transgender and non-binary individuals in educational settings. The enforcement usage of government names can lead to public outings and bullying, thereby increasing the psychological burden on non-binary students. This is consistent with the finding of the study in which the participants choose who they would come out to, in fear of being ostracized by the people around them. Experiences documented by De Graaf et al., (2021) portray that misalignment of legal documentation and gender identity would impact the mental health of an individual. Furthermore, the binary gender norms remain an issue as indicated by the current study. The enforcement of these norms through dress codes and classroom interactions reinforced the exclusion of non-binary students. This is in line with findings from Martino et al., (2020), who observed that non-binary students feel both unseen and invisible due to the binary structures in place. However, the current study diverges from previous findings regarding the usage of gendered facilities. Unlike Wernick et al., (2017) who posited that transgender and non-binary students often feel unsafe in gendered-specific areas such as toilets and locker rooms, the participants in the current study did not report significant issues with gendered facilities within the university setting. Participants who are assigned male at birth (AMAB) shared that they do not have a problem using male toilets, respecting the safety of women.

Similarly, those assigned female at birth (AFAB) felt safer using female toilets. This suggests that while gendered facilities remain a challenge in some context, it may not be a universal concern for all non-binary individuals.

Moreover, a significant challenge identified in the current study is the fear of conservative educators, in which non-binary students end up concealing their gender identity. This is consistent with the findings of Kelley et al., (2022) who noted that adults with authoritative positions have an impact on the welfare of transgender and non-binary students. The behaviours of educators play an important role in either supporting or undermining non-binary students' experiences. As Singh (2012) stress on the importance of supportive educational environment, so did the current study highlight the lack of support and presence of transphobic behaviours amongst educators (predominantly educators who claim to be liberal) can highly affect non-binary students' mental health and academic performance. This aligns with the wider body of research on the adverse effects of hostile educational settings on transgender and non-binary students (Atteberry et al., 2019; Dessel et al., 2017).

5.1.3 Psychological Impact and Mental Health

The current study extends the findings of Thorne et al., (2019) and Vaele et al., (2017), who documented higher rates of anxiety, depression and self harming among non-binary individuals compared to individuals identifying with binary genders. The current study supports this by showing that participants also experience significant mental health challenges, though the challenges are due to external factors such as familial issues and societal non-recognition, rather than the intrinsic factors alone. Participants in the current study also echoed sentiments from Vaele et al., (2017) noting that their mental health struggles were often tied to the lack of recognition and

support in their surroundings, particularly within the educational system. To add on, participants experienced some degree of gender dysphoria, depression (due to grief) and anxiety. However, these issues mostly stemmed from interactions with people around them such as family members. The internal struggle with their gender identity typically occurred at a younger age, during periods of self-discovery. Once participants understood and accepted their true selves, they generally felt content. In light of this, participants also suggested having queer therapist who understands the journey of exploring gender identity, as it could be more relatable and supportive for them as supported by a study done by Benson (2013). Despite previous studies suggesting that non-binary individuals feel the need to be recognized, some participants involved in the current study disagree due to the fear of being ostracized by people around them as supported by a dissertation done by Richards (2019). Due to this, participants prefer to “lay low” and find satisfaction in knowing that their close friends and those who matter to them, know of their gender identity.

5.1.4 Coping Strategies

The current study revealed two primary coping methods: 1) social support from friends, partners and online communities and 2) solitary activities characterized by emotional detachment. These findings align and diverge from previous literature discussed in Chapter 2. The importance of social support has been a recurrent theme in coping strategy research for non-binary and transgender individuals. Consistent with Chinazzo et al., (2022) the findings in the study highlight that positive social interactions and support are crucial for non-binary university students. Similarly, the findings in the current study indicate that non-binary students rely heavily on supportive relationships with friends and partners. Receiving support from loved ones

can boost the self-esteem of LGBTQ+ individuals, which in turn acts as a safeguard for their mental well-being (Song et al., 2023). In the current digital era, online communities have provided reliance on social support and an avenue for non-binary individuals to seek acceptance and understanding in virtual spaces. Online communities offer a platform for non-binary students to connect with like-minded individuals, share experiences, and receive emotional support without fear of judgment or rejection. This coping strategy is significant in environments where physical social support might be limited or absent. In the opinion of Justice and Hooker (2017), many marginalized students often feel most authentic and comfortable when engaging in online discussions with their peers.

Besides, in contrast to the communal nature of social support, the current study identified solitary activities characterized by emotional detachment as another prevalent coping strategy among non-binary university students. These findings mirror the maladaptive strategies reported by Oorthuys et al., (2022) who posited that isolation is often employed to avoid confrontations, stigma, and rejection. However, the current study distinguishes itself by highlighting that emotional detachment in solitary activities can serve as both a means of self-preservation and as a coping mechanism. Solitary activities like engaging in hobbies, practicing mindfulness or immersing in creative pursuits allow non-binary students to manage their emotional well-being in a controlled environment. It allows a way to process emotions independently. While this strategy may lead to periods of isolation, it is not necessarily inherently negative.

5.2 Biological Factors

There are 3 contributing factors that contribute towards the formation of gender identity, particularly in non-binary identities. The interplay of biological, psychological and environmental factors influence the formation of gender identity. In the current study, participants consistently reported feeling different from their peers at a young age, experiencing confusion, and often reprimanded from those around them for deviating from gender norms. For example, assigned male at birth (AMAB) participants did not enjoy the stereotypical “male” activities such as sports or going to the gym, while assigned female at birth (AFAB) participants being criticized for perceived roughness, portrays that early awareness of gender expectations. Even though there is an understanding what it means to be feminine or masculine, participants of this study did not identify with these traits, indicating that they experience divergence from the binary gender framework at the early stages of their life. Consequently, past literature by Wilhelm et al., (2007) suggests that biological factor contribute to gender identity formation through prenatal testosterone exposure leading to “male-typical” development and vice versa. However, the current study did not find participants attributing their gender identity to biological factors as they emphasized different aspects of their experiences.

5.2.1 Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson’s psychosocial development theory provides as a framework for the current study to understand how identity is formed, especially gender identities. It emphasizes the role of social and environmental factors in shaping identities and current study focuses on the 3 stages which are childhood, emerging adulthood and adolescence. According to Salinas-Quiroz and Sweder (2023), for a child to identify as non-binary, they must first become aware of non-binary identities and feel that they do not

conform to the conventional definitions of being a boy or a girl. Likewise, Vygotsky's theory highlights the significance of social interactions and cultural context in cognitive development. Vygotsky said that children learn and internalize societal norms and behaviours through their interactions with others, including parents, teachers, and peers.. In light of both of the theories mentioned, the participants in the current study frequently cited media and online communities as a key factors in realizing and affirming their non-binary identities. This aligns with Petillo (2022) who stipulates that the concept of gender as a spectrum can be comprehended through interactions with parents, media, and informed community members in which the development of genuine gender characteristics can influenced by biological factors, parental encouragements, observational learning and participations in peer groups that supports gender exploration.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the participants have recommended several key initiatives that educational settings can implement to better support their well-being. The recommendations will be able to focus on creating a more inclusive environment that acknowledges and respects diverse gender identities. The first recommendation is to provide a safe and supportive space where non-binary students can express themselves freely. Having a dedicated space for self-expression allows people to explore and affirm their identities without the fear of judgment and discrimination. Some examples can be LGBTQ+ centres, student organizations, queer art events and many more. Next, a zero-tolerance policy should be implemented and enforced within the university setting. Having a clear strict protocol against discrimination is essential in creating a safe and inclusive campus environment. This idea came about from the

majority of the participants as they were inspired by the Debate Club in their universities who adopted this policy/equity board that gives out punishment towards members who discriminate against minorities in the club. Additionally, universities should also provide access to queer therapist who are knowledgeable about the different challenges faced by individuals with different gender identities. This is because queer therapist can offer more sensitive support towards non-binary students as they are able to understand particular in concerns relating to gender identity and it could aid in providing effective counselling and mental health services. Furthermore, having a gender-neutral environment is also a recurrent suggestion by the participants. This includes avoiding unnecessary gender categorization especially in classroom settings; one example being gender-based groupings or references in classrooms. Lastly, universities should educate their communities about the various concepts of gender identity and ensure that these are recognized and respected. Having awareness and understanding of diverse gender identities are crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive campus culture. Educational programs or workshops can help students, faculty members and staff to understand the complex experiences of various gender identities. This knowledge not only promotes inclusivity but also reduces stigma in the university.

5.4 Limitation of Study

The present study offers valuable insights into the experiences, challenges and coping strategies of non-binary university students, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. The limitations highlights the challenges faced by the researcher during the research process. The first limitation was the difficulty in finding participants. Despite the assurance of confidentiality, many potential participants were

hesitant to take part in the study due to the fear of publicly coming out. This fear is understandable given the stigma and repercussions they might face. Another challenge was the lack of available resources, references or journal articles that specifically targets and address the non-binary experiences in the context of Malaysia. There are countless of existing literature that focuses on the broader transgender community, whom either have gone through transformation, cross dress, and many more. Thus, overlooking the experiences of non-binary individuals that falls under the transgender umbrella. Additionally, the data had to rely on a small sample from a monitoring report and online blogs which does not fully encapsulate the challenges non-binary individuals faced in Malaysia. Lastly, in terms of participant diversity, there were less participants who were AMAB which means that the study might not fully represent the experiences of AMAB non-binary individuals. The cultural background and different upbringing of AMAB were not adequately explore, hence limiting the understanding of identity formation.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the lived experiences of non-binary university students encompasses complex challenges with its advantages and challenges of identifying as a non-binary individual. The comprehension of the formation of gender identity allows people to develop gender traits that is supported by various factors. The challenges faced by non-binary university students extracted from the subthemes, includes conforming to a binary environment, usage of dead/government names, enforcement of binary gender norms, and being afraid of conservative educators. However, with the right support through close friends and online cimmunity, non-binary individuals are able to cope and overcome these challenges in the context of Malaysia. Policymakers and

authoritative figures play an imperative role in providing targeted support for this community as ultimately, non-binary individuals embody the essence of being true to oneself.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant,
Please take some time to read through the following information.

Research Title

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF NON-BINARY
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Research Purpose

I am from the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). I am interested to study about gender identity. Therefore, I would like to invite you to take part in this study and share your experiences, that you think is relevant regarding this matter.

Your Role

If you agree to be a part of this study, you will be involved in an interview session that may take 1 to 2 hours of your time. However, the time allocated for the interview depends on you and we can set the time and place according to your liking.

Participation Agreement

Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw yourself from the study anytime you want. I will be recording the interview session and once it has been transcribed, the information will be destroyed. I will not disclose your name or any other private information that can reveal your identity in any records and information that we will use in this study.

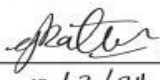
Confidentiality

All your information is guaranteed confidentiality and I am the only one to know your participation in the study. I will be using your information for the study's findings, report, and presentation. However, I will make sure that the information used will not reveal your name and it stays confidential. This includes extracts written in the article and during the presentation.

If at any point you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher, Crystal Belle or contact us at 013-5682553 or email me at crystalbelle1998@gmail.com. You can also contact the supervisor of this study, Dr Jamayah Saili at 584507 or email her at sjamayah@unimas.my.

I highly welcome your cooperation and participation in this study and appreciate your sharing of experiences. Thank you.

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

 Informed Consent Form EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS Please ensure that you have consented to the followings before being interviewed: • I understand the purpose and procedures of the study • I was given the participant information sheet beforehand • I understand that my participation is voluntary • I understand that my name, address, and other private information will not be used • I understand that my answers and reactions will be kept confidential • I agree and consented to be a part of this study • I agree and consented for my interview session to be recorded for the use of this study Signature : <u></u> Date : <u>12/3/24</u>	Participant 1 Name: Nini
 Informed Consent Form EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS Please ensure that you have consented to the followings before being interviewed: • I understand the purpose and procedures of the study • I was given the participant information sheet beforehand • I understand that my participation is voluntary • I understand that my name, address, and other private information will not be used • I understand that my answers and reactions will be kept confidential • I agree and consented to be a part of this study • I agree and consented for my interview session to be recorded for the use of this study Signature : <u></u> Date : <u>21/3/2024</u>	Participant 2 Name: Beau



Informed Consent Form

**EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES
OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

Participant 3

Name: Marshall

Please ensure that you have consented to the followings before being interviewed:

- I understand the purpose and procedures of the study
- I was given the participant information sheet beforehand
- I understand that my participation is voluntary
- I understand that my name, address, and other private information will not be used
- I understand that my answers and reactions will be kept confidential
- I agree and consented to be a part of this study
- I agree and consented for my interview session to be recorded for the use of this study

Signature :

Date :

03/04/2024



Informed Consent Form

**EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES
OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

Participant 4 Name:

Iman

Please ensure that you have consented to the followings before being interviewed:

- I understand the purpose and procedures of the study
- I was given the participant information sheet beforehand
- I understand that my participation is voluntary
- I understand that my name, address, and other private information will not be used
- I understand that my answers and reactions will be kept confidential
- I agree and consented to be a part of this study
- I agree and consented for my interview session to be recorded for the use of this study

Signature :

Date :

17/04/2024



Informed Consent Form

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Please ensure that you have consented to the followings before being interviewed:

- I understand the purpose and procedures of the study
- I was given the participant information sheet beforehand
- I understand that my participation is voluntary
- I understand that my name, address, and other private information will not be used
- I understand that my answers and reactions will be kept confidential
- I agree and consented to be a part of this study
- I agree and consented for my interview session to be recorded for the use of this study

Signature : 

Date : 20/4/2024

Participant 5

Name: Adi



Informed Consent Form

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Please ensure that you have consented to the followings before being interviewed:

- I understand the purpose and procedures of the study
- I was given the participant information sheet beforehand
- I understand that my participation is voluntary
- I understand that my name, address, and other private information will not be used
- I understand that my answers and reactions will be kept confidential
- I agree and consented to be a part of this study
- I agree and consented for my interview session to be recorded for the use of this study

Signature : 

Date : 21/4/2024

Participant 6

Name: Lala



Informed Consent Form

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF NON-BINARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Please ensure that you have consented to the followings before being interviewed:

- I understand the purpose and procedures of the study
- I was given the participant information sheet beforehand
- I understand that my participation is voluntary
- I understand that my name, address, and other private information will not be used
- I understand that my answers and reactions will be kept confidential
- I agree and consented to be a part of this study
- I agree and consented for my interview session to be recorded for the use of this study

Signature : _____

Date : 22/4/2024

Participant 7

Name: Tennie



Informed Consent Form

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Signature : _____

Date : 28/4/2024

Participant 8

Name: Kira

APPENDIX C

GUIDED QUESTIONNAIRE

DEMOGRAPHIC	Can you please introduce yourself? Share your preferred pronouns or any other identifiers you would like to mention.
	What is your cultural and/or ethnic background?
	What is your family dynamics like? (communication styles, roles and responsibilities within the family, support system, etc)
	Would you mind sharing your journey with gender identity throughout your life?
	When did you recognize you experienced gender differently that did not fit within

	the notion of gender?
	What was your experience like when you recognized your gender identity was not binary?
	What does it mean to live authentically in your gender identity?
	What was your experience like when you began expressing your gender identity?
CHALLENGES	What are some of the challenges you have faced as a non-binary student within the university environment?
	How has your non-binary identity influenced your academic journey, including interactions with faculty and peers?
	Are there any specific academic policies or practices that you find supportive or

	challenging as a non-binary student?
COPING STRATEGIES	Can you describe the support networks or communities that have been helpful to you as a non-binary student?
	Can you share any experiences or instances where these support networks or communities have made a significant impact on your well-being or academic journey?
	What are the coping strategies that you employ in order to navigate the challenges related to your gender identity?
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you provide to university administrations to better support non-binary students?
	How can academic intuitions enhance

	inclusivity for non-binary individuals in both policy and practice?
	Are there specific resources or services you find particularly helpful in supporting your needs?

APPENDIX D

TRANSCRIPT

Participant 1 (Nini)

Crystal	I see. Do you feel like whenever people identify you as he, do you feel like you're in a different identity or are you still the same in a way?
Nini	I still feel the same, because I'm still me. It just makes me feel a little bit different because I feel more "seen" in a way, because like I'm not necessarily defined by just the "she" pronoun. For example, like when people use "he" on me, it makes me feel like "ok, I'm also like beyond just a feminine ideation of myself".
Crystal	Right, so would you say you feel more powerful if you were a he? Like if you were to identify as a he at that moment?
Nini	In a way, yes I would say.
Crystal	Hmm interesting, Is identifying as a he or them, is it like um how do you say, is it like today you feel like you're a he and then tomorrow is a different thing? Is that how it is?
Nini	Ahh, on certain days yes. It depends on my mood sometimes. I would say right now, I'm more comfortable. So using she/her I'm ok with it. But some days, I feel more masculine, so I want people to use "he" on me. Because there's certain days where I ask people to use "he" as I'm not comfortable with people using she. Or if I dress very differently than how I normally dress, I would feel weird to be address as the outward gender expression than I am at the moment. I feel like it doesn't really suit me at the moment if people were to address me as a "she" if I don't dress like a "she" at that time.

Crystal	Right, they're just so angsty
Beau	Yeah, they are. I do feel angsty and all but I also like talking about other emotions you know. I like romance and all that kind of stuff and I couldn't really find that kind of conversation with boys.
Crystal	Yeah understandable
Beau	So yeah, that was like the telling flag of my gender identity.
Crystal	So what was your experience like when you began expressing your gender identity? When you began fully expressing it at a young age and at uni, how was that like?
Beau	Oh obviously when I was young, I expressed it freely to an extent because of the era back then, but during uni as well it began with just like very small subtle things. It was mostly me starting to realize that I don't really need to care about how I express myself to people anymore. I used to be very self-conscious about how I look and stuff because I'm scared of going over the line and thinking of what people would think of me if I dress a certain way or what would people say I wore a thick eyeliner or whatever. And then like I slowly embraced it fully and it just felt very liberating to finally not care about these additional worries anymore.
Crystal	Did your friends understand that you were non-binary by the way you dress? Or did you have to tell them?
Beau	For some of my friends, I just don't tell, but I just assume that they have a hint towards it. And for my other friends whom I told, their first reaction was like "yeah that make sense"

Participant 2 (Beau)

Participant 3 (Marshall)

Marshall	For my university, it's already known for being somewhat tolerant but at the same time, I think I've told you that I don't really- well at least publicly come out. So my lecturers addressed me by my given government name and in terms of accommodation, I don't face many negative experiences and what not. I know that there are some trans kids and they are very openly out telling that they are queer and they ask for accommodation, and I think my uni abide by it but they don't go through much to help these queer students. They offer counselling services and therapy session which was really helpful but other than that, they don't go beyond as to provide for us.
Crystal	So you don't have any problems with the system of questionnaires that asked for your specific genders?
Marshall	Yeah, ok thank you for pointing that out. When it comes to things like that, it's always a bit sad because the person handing out all these forms are not from my uni administration, it's from the students itself- and that's another problem altogether. But then, the biggest issue here is that there are surprisingly a lot of lecturers who (thank God I didn't have to go through this) but my friends had to go through lecturers who has a certain background for liberal studies and they start to project their own beliefs in the educational system. There has been times where they asked students to write essays and it's obvious that the teaching is traditional, very Islamic and there has been instances where the entire course was just the lecturer talking about trans people and just spitting out nonsense saying that trans people are not women and all. That lecturer even have a whole assignment where students must write a paper about why women should be this or 'what are the characteristic of a man?' or 'what are the characteristics of a woman?' I find that so weird and upsetting-

Participant 4 (Iman)

Crystal	Is there a point where you have a problem with answering questionnaires in uni that ask you to state your gender; male or female?
Iman	Yeah kind of, but I usually go by the assigned gender that I was born with because I know public universities are strict on things like this.
Crystal	Do you also have a problem with the gender toilets or group assignments that are based on genders where one group has to consist of all girls and vice versa?
Iman	The toilet thing never really bothered me. I think I just like the female toilet more than the men's because men's toilet can be really gross so I think I'm kind of privileged in that regard. I grew up with women my whole life and I feel more comfortable being surrounded by women. As for assigned groups, I don't really care that much. Again, I'm just kind of fluid about these things. But if you want to talk about my experiences as being perceived as a woman, I can give you some insights in that regard, I get along fairly well with the female students here, no one has ever had any problems with me. So yeah.
Crystal	Does any of your classmates know what your sexual orientation is?
Iman	No, they don't because we only started class 4 weeks ago and I just got into campus like a week ago. It's all still very new right now for me, I just got into university, I'm still trying to sort of cope things out as far as I know. So far, the uni is not as bad as people kept telling me about as in being religious and disciplined. But who knows? As far as I know, there's a lot of queer people in my course but they're not open about it.

Participant 5 (Adi)

Crystal	I see, I think you've answered one of the question I had for you which was; what was your experience like when you began expressing your gender identity? And I can assume it was a reliving feeling for you?
Adi	I guess you could say that. It went from a rollercoaster of emotions. From feeling confused about who I am inside, to feeling relive that I finally kn ew what I felt inside to feeling comfortable in my own skin and body. I guess you could say that the experience was worth it. I would say it's been a long time coming since I've felt this content about myself. I started expressing my gender identity fully at the age of 17 years old, during my final high school years. That was when I came out to people close around me and to my dad. From then on, I've only allowed open minded people in my circle that won't made me feel icky about myself just like how the others did back in high school.
Crystal	I see, I'm glad that you find your journey with gender identity to be worth while. We'll move to the next question which is; what does it mean to live authentically in your gender identity?
Adi	I think to authentically live in my gender identity is to truly be myself without the fear trying to hide myself or "water down" a part of me that only some people could accept. After being out towards my close friends and family, it felt liberating knowing that the people that I love, those close to me and those who actually matters, accepts me for who I am. Don't get me wrong, even with the acceptance of those close to me, I still have that fear within me. I still have that fear that people are going to come at me. As long as I focus on who matters in my life, I can still be me even with the fear.

Participant 6 (Lala)

Crystal	That's nice. Ok we'll move to the next part which is institutional support. The question is; based on your experiences what recommendations would you provide to university administrations to better support non-binary students?
Lala	I would recommend that universities to establish a specific or dedicated support services for non-binary students and one good example would be counselling services for non-binary students, including a counsellor that is knowledgeable about gender diversity. Looking back, I think it would've help me understand my identity better if I were to have someone to properly guide me. I know some non-binary uni students who are still trying to figure themselves out, who is still exploring their gender identity and they must've gone through more than just their gender identity. I guess it would be cool to have a proper counsellor that is knowledgeable on these topics.
Crystal	Interesting, ok the next question would be; how can academic institution enhance inclusivity for non-binary individuals in both policy and practice?
Lala	I know this is such a far-off dream especially living in Malaysia, it may seem like it's impossible to reach but if academic institutions could implement gender-affirming policies such as allowing the students to use their preferred names and pronouns on official documents and offer training and education on gender diversity for faculty and staff. I know it seems too hard to reach but if I could recommend one thing that would create a more inclusive space for all, it would be those two.

Participant 7 (Tennie)

Crystal	Right, so this part of the questionnaire would be on the institutional support. Based on your experience, what recommendations would you provide to university administrations to better support non-binary students?
Tennie	Hm, maybe to employ what the debate community is doing. Having that structure of zero tolerance policy. If university administrations can employ better policies on not only educating staff and students but also having to imposed actionable consequences on discrimination, that would've been really helpful for the community. Does the answer make sense <i>ka</i> ? I know the answer seems too far off, too impossible, to hard to achieve, but that's how I personally feel that could help.
Crystal	No, you gave good insights, it's what you feel so I can't say it wrong or far off. From that answer alone, what do you think can help institution to enhance inclusivity for non-binary individuals in both policy and practice?
Tennie	Maybe by starting off small like acknowledging there is a gender identity beyond just female and male, having to acknowledge that we are not "others" so that would be really helpful to be more inclusive. Other than that, if institution could provide a space for us maybe a space for us to express ourselves through art, or by showcasing our art, that would be really good in getting people to listen to our stories and experiences.
Crystal	Right, ok the last question would be are there any specific resources or services that you find helpful in supporting your needs?
Tennie	To me, it's online communities like Reddit or Discord, social media as well that has all my favourite non-binary artist that showcase their queer art. Seeing art like that is really helpful because it just acknowledges the sense of validation and belonging that I have because seeing people online being able to make it, it makes me think that I could do it. If I saw the bigger picture, I know I can be like that too.

Participant 8 (Kira)

Crystal	I see, ok the next part of the question is based on the challenges. So, what are some of the challenges that you faced as a non-binary student within the univeristy environment?
Kira	Sorry for calling you out, but I noticed that the questions under the challenges section are more or less similar with different layers to it, is it ok if I answer all of it in one sitting, I'm kind of expected to attend a meeting soon.
Crystal	Yes, sure. So sorry for taking your time. Yes, you may do so.
Kira	Ok, based on all the 3 questions, there are challenges that I faced. I know it's nothing huge- like I know I don't get thrown eggs on over my gender identity, but I know how some of these small examples that I will give, will be problematic to some non-binary people. It certainly bothered me for awhile- until I decided to not care. But here are some of them; one of the challenges I've encountered is the lack of awareness and understanding of non-binary identities among both faculty and peers. This sometimes leads to misgendering or assumptions about my identity, which can be hurtful and invalidating. As for the second question, my non-binary identity has definitely influenced my academic journey in various ways. For instance, navigating group projects or class discussions can be challenging, especially when gendered language or assumptions are involved. Additionally, interacting with faculty members who may not be familiar with non-binary identities can sometimes require extra effort to educate and advocate for myself. Lastly, in terms of supportive policies, I appreciate universities that offer gender-inclusive therapy. Even though the therapist are not knowledgeable in all the different gender identity, I don't really mind because I can always terminate a session if I don't like the therapist. Queer people are still normal people who still face anxiety, depression and all those mental health related illnesses. However, there are still challenges, such as outdated gender markers on forms, such as answering a google form questionnaire.