STRATHCLYDE BUSINESS SCHOOL

DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING

"Generally, I live a lie":

A Study of Transgender Consumer Vulnerability

Sophie Duncan-Shepherd

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

Awareness of gender fluidity has grown particularly in society (Hines and Taylor, 2018); through the internet and online media, consumers now have access to discuss, debate, identify and interpret gender in a multitude of ways. This research aims to explore the experiences of transgender consumers in an increasingly hostile cultural environment. Through qualitative methods, this study focuses on the ways in which consumer vulnerability and gender diversity may intersect in consumer lives.

Findings explore complex lived experiences of trans people; in everyday gender performance, in navigating servicescapes and digital spaces, and in finding community and representation in consumption contexts. Institutional power in the forms of healthcare, government legislation, and practices such as the use of algorithms on social media can act to create a sense of othering by presenting trans narratives as morally questionable, miserable or even dangerous. The powerlessness of trans people may also be extended into home and family life, where misrecognition of hurtful or harmful actions may often go unchallenged. The dominance of cisheteronormativity in retail spaces creates challenges for trans people navigating routine purchases of clothing and other products to express their gender identity such as make-up. As most of these physical spaces are divided along binary male/female lines, consumers transitioning across genders may face difficulty in shopping for items in the 'wrong' part of the store; participants mention being challenged by cisgender staff and other consumers on being in a space incongruent with how their gender is perceived.

The contributions of this thesis are:

- Theorising marketplace distress in everyday experiences and how it can be a motivator for consumers to drive social change. This also helps to illuminate interrelationships between stigma and vulnerability in consumer experiences.

- Exploring consumer responses to vulnerability, building on the notion of "queer failure" (Pirani and Daskalopolou, 2022). In this context, the negativity of failure is reworked and the social control of binary gender norms is refused.

- Centralising marginalised trans voices through thoughtful, reflexive, feminist research practice. Trans and queer joy are brought to the fore, to highlight the richness of trans experiences.

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For Nana, who always believed I could.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis will explore consumer vulnerability in the context of transgender and gender diverse consumers. This chapter first introduces and outlines the rationale, context and background of the research, before moving on to briefly describe the theoretical framings of the study. Next, the chapter highlights the importance of language in studying LGBTQ+ contexts, offering a few key definitions of terms used throughout the thesis. The methodology is then synopsised, and finally the research aims and objectives are presented. The chapter concludes with a breakdown of the structure and approach of the thesis, giving a short summary of each chapter.

1.2 Research rationale

With the rise of consumer culture, everyone is now a consumer, and research has begun to explore a wide variety of perspectives and identities, including genders (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014; Ruvio and Belk, 2018, Vargas and Greer, 2013). As the trans community becomes more visible, a deeper understanding of its experiences is needed. Visibility in this research refers to the presence of transgender characters, writers, activists, actors, through media such as news articles, opinion pieces, television and movies, fiction and nonfiction books. The Independent Press Standards Organisation noted a 400% increase in coverage of transgender issues between 2009 and 2019 (Mediatique, 2020). The links here between trans issues and wider LGBTQ+ inequalities are highlighted as without the heightened public awareness of LGB people, transgender narratives could be less possible as elements of sex, gender, and

sexual orientation are inextricably interconnected (Berberick, 2018). In an ever-evolving cultural environment, consumer researchers are called upon to be inclusive, impactful, to examine cultural meanings and to explore how consumption practices affect both the individual and wider society (Crockett et al., 2013; Cross et al., 2022). Fitchett and Cronin (2022, 7) urge researchers to "de-romanticise the market", adding that: "To de-romanticise means to work with, advance, import and export concepts and theories that can foster deeper understanding of the 'wicked problems' that society encounters, but also to be brave enough to challenge". Wicked social problems have been described as "those that inflict harm on communities, larger society, or the natural environment on which societies rely" (Huff and Barnhart 2022, 719), which can be entangled with market systems and require change(s) to those systems to enable mitigation to begin. Inspired and undaunted by the "fluid, contradictory and amorphous nature" (Westberg et al 2017, 95) of wicked problems, this research recognises the complexity of consumer vulnerability to try to more effectively develop theorising, and contribute to alleviating and highlighting the problem of gender-based vulnerabilities.

Consumption is one of a wide range of social practices through which gender is constructed and expressed (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Martens, 2009; Seregina, 2019). Despite the increased visibility of issues surrounding gender non-conformity and particularly the transgender community, few studies have been conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the community's experiences as consumers (McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg, 2017; Ruvio and Belk, 2018). This research contributes to our understanding of consumer vulnerability, looking at the ways in which consumers

navigate a binary gendered marketplace. Prior research (Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg 2005; Hamilton et al., 2014; Piacentini, Hibbert and Hogg, 2014) has examined the impacts of vulnerability on consumer wellbeing, and this study adds further insights by integrating insights from similar areas of research such as symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2003) and stigma (Goffman, 1959). Additionally, although gender has been investigated in the vulnerability literature previously (Hamilton 2009, 2012; Hill & Stephens, 1997), prior studies have focused on women's experiences, and the range of masculinities and femininities at play in consumer vulnerability have been largely unexplored.

On a personal note, this thesis aims to address a gap in understanding of trans and nonbinary lived experiences which reflects the author's own journey with gender. As the research progressed, my own gender identity and expression changed, shaped in part by how much the findings of the study resonated with me. From beginning the PhD process confident in my belonging under the LGBTQ+ acronym in regards to my sexuality, I discovered through my reading of academic and popular writings on gender that I did not comfortably fit into the category of cisgender either. At first, I assumed this to be part of my empathy with the trans people with whom I was interacting every day. However, I had something of a lightbulb moment during a research interview in which a participant described a sense of misalignment with being a woman, following a discussion of femininity and masculinity.

For me, the significance of this was both surprising and concerning. Although it felt great to admit to myself that 'woman' is not all that I am, I worried that I was, in a

sense, too close to my research topic. My own vulnerabilities as a PhD researcher came to the fore, as imposter syndrome and anxiety of the value of this research echoed loudly in my head. Reassurance that my gender journey could also be integral to the doing of this research came through the interpretive and feminist philosophical approaches taken in this thesis, as discussed in Chapter Four. I am also indebted to my trans friends online, who helped me critically engage with my gender both personally and academically. This helped to further shape my thinking and theorising. My own transness lends a further level of insight to the interpretations presented here, as reflected in the inclusion of my researcher fieldnotes in Chapters Five and Six.

Throughout this work, my aim has been to elevate the voices of trans people and centre their stories in the research. It is an unexpected benefit that I can also speak of my lived experience of gender diversity and vulnerability as a consumer to help tackle those 'wicked problems' we as a society face today.

1.3 Research context: being trans in the UK

Trans and gender diverse identities have received little attention in consumer research; often, gender and sexuality are conflated, and identities encapsulated in the LGBT+ acronym are spoken of as a whole, rather than the fragmented, intersecting variety that exist in reality.

There are currently no available statistics on the proportion of the UK population who identify outside the strict male/female gender binary which is embedded in British

society. Historically, transgender people provided mass media with tabloid-style titillation; Christine Jorgensen's outing via the New York Daily News headline "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Bombshell" in the US in 1952 mirrored the outing of British model April Ashley by the Sunday People in 1961. Narratives based in the shock value of transitioning from male to female set the format for portraying trans lives in the press for the next 50 or so years. The sensational nature of these narratives means that public awareness of the real issues impacting transgender people, such as poverty, lack of access to healthcare, addiction, and mental health, is still relatively low and poorly understood. This can create misunderstandings and incorrect assumptions about what it means to be trans in the UK in 2022.

Since trans people's lives in general have become increasingly visible in recent years, there has been significant public discussion about trans and women's rights, safe spaces, and what it means to be a woman or man. As Hines (2019) explains, the lines between online and offline media have become blurred as debates on gender moved between the two. Commentary from prominent figures has frequently sparked debate on and offline. These discussions have gained much traction in recent years on social media platforms such as Twitter, where exposure to arguments on all sides of gender can often be magnified. Emerging in response to the government's proposed (and since largely dropped) reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004, campaigns in support of and lobbying for such reforms were quickly met by organisations set up for exactly the opposite, continuing a division which arose within feminism from decades prior (Mackay, 2021). Where women and trans people seem to have common goals in struggling with societal oppression and would appear to be natural allies in

destabilizing gender, there exists a deep, acrimonious schism within feminism with regards to the inclusion of trans identities (Carrera-Fernández and DePalma, 2020).

This schism between anti-trans and other feminists, including trans-inclusive Radical Feminists, stems from Second Wave feminism – the movements of the 1960s to the 1980s. During this time, there was much debate about the nature of gender and sex, and although an anti-essentialist position did emerge in which gender was viewed as socially constructed, the entanglement of sex and biological characteristics of the body endured. The category of 'woman' became embedded within a binary model of culture, defined as "someone who had been socialised from birth into the restrictive structures of patriarchy and had endured subsequent oppressive life-experience" (Hines 2020, 703). This meant the continuation and reinforcement of binary gender categories based on external genital observation to assign gender at birth. This is obviously problematic for trans women (and less visibly, trans men, nonbinary individuals, and others who identify outside the gender binary); while acknowledging that 'gender' can be fluid, this argument fixes sex at birth as unalterable. Thus, while a trans woman may 'identify' as a woman, she can never be a woman due to her biology (ibid).

This stance on trans issues has become colloquially known as 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism' (TERF), or 'gender-critical' (GC). The links of anti-gender ideology groups and gender critical feminists to the Christian right wing in the US (Hines, 2020) may in part explain the contestation of diversity and cultural change shown by minimal in number yet loud voices which emanate from this perspective. These ideologies are grounded in a rising fascism and intolerance which is spreading across

Europe, as misinformation and distrust become increasingly commonplace and the rights of LGBTQ+ and other minorities come under threat. As can be seen from recent developments in the US, with the overturn of the Roe vs Wade ruling, intolerance is having wide-reaching consequences across many aspects of life.

Most recently, the tide of intolerance has manifested in sport, where an international organisation has effectively banned trans women from taking part in competitive swimming. While on the surface this may seem to be an exclusionary decision aimed at a marginalised group, the wider ripples of debating trans identities have political consequences for many other gender non-conforming women. Indeed, high profile individuals have enabled transphobic views to become more widespread, and associated with an anti-leftist, anti-woke stance on society. Olympic diver Tom Daley critiques the promotion of LGBTQ+ equality at the Commonwealth Games, citing some member nations' appalling record of homophobia and prejudice, others such as JK Rowling (Worthen, 2022) and Olympic swimmer Sharron Davis espouse the 'gender-critical' position that trans women are biological men and are not welcome in women's spaces or sports.

This provides necessary context to the environment in which trans people in the UK must live as consumers. There has been intense discussion particularly in UK newspapers of 'trans ideology', described as "the idea that people should count as men or women according to how they feel and what they declare, instead of their biology" (Joyce 2021, 12). In the 'post-truth era' where differently positioned knowledge claims coexist in extensive but fragmented digital spaces, 'gender critical' narratives conflict

with the ways in which trans people themselves describe and discuss their experiences (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020). These issues are important to consider given the reciprocal roles of media and the marketplace in shaping cultural attitudes, especially attitudes towards and (de)stigmatization of marginalised communities and identities. As Mackay (2021, 9) explains, "the warlike phrasing that is often used about the gender wars is not entirely an over-dramatization... reaction is inevitable in the current environment". In this environment then, it may be possible to see how "there is something both risky and true in claiming that socially disadvantaged groups are vulnerable" (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016, 2).

It is these interconnections between social inequalities, culture, and consumption that can converge in experiences of vulnerability that are explored further here. Reflecting on the context of context – the systemic and structural in consumer lives – enables socially and culturally informed understandings which can help to bridge the gap between micro (i.e. individual lived experiences) and macro (i.e. market systems and institutional factors). This enables us as researchers to view phenomena such as vulnerability through a socio-culturally embedded lens, to critique the wider norms and institutions which limit and disadvantage certain groups in society. It is to the theoretical framings of the thesis that this chapter now turns, outlining the consumer vulnerability, and gender performativity and feminist thinking which have influenced the design and write-up of the study.

1.4 Theoretical framings: Consumer vulnerability

The complexity of consumer vulnerability makes it a challenging phenomenon to address, and researchers are looking not only to the individual but wider social and cultural factors which constrain, liberate and influence consumption behaviour. In their bibliometric analysis of the consumer vulnerability field, Khare and Jain (2022) note that there are contributions from diverse theoretical perspectives and that "marketplace exclusion", "public policy", "stigma" and "resilience" appear as significant topics within keyword clusters on consumer vulnerability. Their analysis also reveals the development of themes within the field over the last few years such as intersectionality, impoverishment, transformative research, and well-being. This points to a growing field of study (Hamilton, Dunnett and Piacentini, 2016) which critically engages with the power of the market and consumption in human lives.

Analysis of vulnerability can be approached in different ways depending on how the potential for harm or materialization of harm occurs; researchers may choose to focus on particular populations via characteristics such as age or race, may consider environmental conditions at a community level (e.g. poverty or disaster recovery), or may wish to deepen understandings by exploring meanings and lived experiences of vulnerability (Baker, LaBarge and Baker, 2015).

This study chooses to focus on a population, trans and gender diverse consumers, and also explores meanings and experiences of vulnerability. Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) argue that vulnerability should not be solely defined by biophysical or psychosocial traits, by individual states, such as grief, and external factors such as

stigma, or only by the physical and logistical elements of consumption which may affect vulnerability, such as the accessibility of shops or retail spaces for those with a disability. As such, this study aims to take into account a range of factors which can contribute to vulnerability; transgender identity represents an embodied individual state based on biophysical and psychosocial aspects of the self, which can be externally influenced by the perceptions of others, and which can also create barriers to participation in consumer culture and consumption-based society. In addition to consumer vulnerability, this research also draws insights from stigma and symbolic violence as parallel theoretical framings. In combining sociological work on stigma (Goffman, 1959; Mirabito et al., 2016), symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2003; Vikas, Varman and Belk, 2015) and vulnerability (McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg, 2017; Ruvio and Belk, 2018), a more holistic theoretical view of these phenomena can be created.

The theoretical background of consumer vulnerability is explored in greater depth in Chapter Two. The following section introduces gender performativity as a theoretical frame, and looks at the influence of feminist philosophies on this research.

1.5 Theoretical framings: Gender performativity and feminist philosophies

Consumer research has a long-established history of borrowing and applying theorising and concepts from varied disciplines like sociology, social and behavioural psychology, and cultural studies. This research has been influenced by feminist thinking in philosophical outlook as well as in formulating the methodology. This study is inspired particularly by the works of Judith Butler (1990; 2004) and Sara

Ahmed (2006) in feminist philosophy.

Sara Ahmed's work as an independent scholar focuses on the challenges and experiences of power in everyday life (Laubscher, Hook and Desai, 2021). In Ahmed's work, discussions of bodies inhabiting space and the sense of disorientation have helped to inform theorising of transgender experiences in the present study. Ahmed writes about gender, feminism and failure, saying: "When the gender system does not become a habit, you have failed... that is how feminism can be lived: as the failure to be habituated" (Ahmed 2017, 55). These ideas of gender and feminist failure have also influenced the framing of a key contribution of the thesis on queer failure.

Additionally, Ahmed's (2006a) discussion of queer phenomenology is of particular interest for this research. Noting the influence of prior critiques and creative engagements with phenomenology, the author states that "feminist philosophers have shown us how social differences are effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others" (Ahmed 2006a, 544). The importance of bodily experiences is also part of her discussion of orientations, looking at "how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon" (Ahmed 2006b, 2). This approach to the body and space is further developed by the author over the course of her book, coming to a conclusion which discusses disorientation in terms of phenomenology: "disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place... it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence" (ibid, 160). Here, links can be seen between bodies of work by Ahmed, Butler, and Bourdieu.

Through reading Butler's work (1990; 2004), categories of identity and gender became more visible, alongside the potential for these categories to be challenged through diverse expressions and performances of gender. This also highlighted the reciprocity of identity performance; to be intelligible as a human being, one must be able to be gendered through the perceptions of others. Butler discusses heterosexual hegemony as a sense-making system through which gender identity is understood, supported by the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, and opposite sex desire (Maclaran, 2017). This hegemony is sustained through regulatory discourses and cultural practices, but it can also be disrupted and subverted by challenging the repetition of gendered practices, which Butler develops as a theory of gender performativity. This theory is discussed in more depth in Chapter Three, and in Chapter Four, where the feminist philosophy and methodological approaches of this research are considered in more detail.

The gender performativity lens employed in this study is influenced by Butler's (1990) conceptualisation of gender as socially constructed, where repeated performances of specific cultural acts create a legibly gendered subject. Through a cultural appreciation of vulnerability experiences and the ways in which marketplace discursive forces dictate gender norms, we can begin to understand how vulnerabilities can occur simultaneously and iteratively. Drawing on work in sociology, for example that of Bourdieu (2003), the power dynamics of the macro socio-cultural environment can be made visible. Theorising symbolic violence as a subversive form of power and control,

Bourdieu's (ibid) writings provide insights into the unseen and hidden ways in which norms shape vulnerabilities.

This thesis seeks to combine the lenses of performativity and power to better understand consumer vulnerability for the individual themselves and for the individual as a member of a capitalist society; by looking at systemic and wider social factors, we can highlight how the macro-environment influences the ways in which we talk about vulnerabilities, both as researchers and through listening to our participants' voices. The next section explores the role of language in the approach of study.

1.6 Trans Queers: contested language

It is important to be conscious of language as its extensive power is transhistorical (Hall, 2020). In addition to awareness of the need for marginalised LGBTQ+ voices to be heard, there is a further complication in the contested nature of terminology and language used within communities to describe themselves and each other. At a theoretical level, academic queer theorists have argued that queer theory challenges the notion of an essentialist identity shared by LGBT+ people (Slagle, 2006). Indeed, the very word "queer" has generational implications and has been divisive because of its connotations as a (now often reclaimed) slur. In writing parts of this thesis, I have been challenged on the use of queer to describe both gender and sexual identities. Queer as an umbrella term describing gay, lesbian and more recently, bisexual and transgender people, emerged in the early 1990s and has been increasingly used to signify an entire community of 'othered' gender and sexual identities and expressions

(Love, 2014), similarly to the ways in which LGBT has come to encompass more than the simplified L, G, B and T represented by the acronym.

Part of the challenge in researching with diverse LGBTQ+ communities is the constant shifting of language, as terms can have existing historical connotations. The plurality of LGBTQ+ identities is captured in the recent *Gender(S)* special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, in which Steinfield, Hutton and Cheded (2020, 1) urge the recognition that "all too often, the term "gender" becomes a misnomer for women", which obscures the trans, nonbinary and queer identities which have long existed throughout human history. Indeed, the terms "trans", "nonbinary" and "queer" are themselves in flux, encompassing more and less as meanings alter and change over time. Queer in particular is a contested term; not only does it have an academic usage in terms of theorising, its origins as a homophobic insult mean it can still be hurtful if incorrectly used as a descriptor of sexual and/or gender identity. Much like dyke and faggot, re-appropriation of queer can be generationally divided, where those whose first-hand experience of its pejorative use point out an impossibility of separating it from that use. Further, it may often be the case that such words are embedded within a white, Western cultural perspective and simply fail to translate well for LGBTQ+ Indigenous or communities of colour (Panfil, 2020). This is an important point as gender and sexuality cannot easily be separated from other intersecting identities. The language used by Black, Indigenous and other peoples of colour is culturally specific and should not be appropriated by those outside of those communities.

There is scope for consumer research to borrow insights from transgender theorising; locating and destabilizing social identities, understanding identities as socially constructed while foregrounding physical embodiment, could provide new avenues to understand and explore dynamically integrated narratives of consumers' lived experiences (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). However there should also be recognition that, broadly, transgender people have not received the most respectful treatment in research.

The pathologisation of trans identity, challenged by emergent transgender theorising in the 1990s to today, stems from work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which conceptualised being trans as an inversion, a condition of psychosexual development where trans people were the object of medical knowledge and legal discussion. The medicalised view of transness meant that much research prior to the 1990s was conducted by medical practitioners and clinicians who held keys to the gates of gender affirming treatment for trans people, thus creating a severe power differential in the research relationship (Stryker and Whittle, 2006). Outside of clinical and legal contexts, an othering of trans people is unfortunately also commonplace, even when the researchers' intentions are to explore queer and trans experiences and theory.

Referring to "transgenders" rather than transgender people has the effect of situating a marginalised group as objects of research; the difference between research on a population and research with a population is starkly shown. A specific example of what this means is an overview of transgender theorising for social work by Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) which, despite its interesting arguments and comprehensive

consideration of queer and trans theory, intermittently uses othering wording. The fluidity of language in the realm of gender identity and expression cannot be emphasised enough; terms become outdated and meanings change so frequently among such a heterogeneous community so that even the most well-meaning researcher may trip up on occasion. This does not mean however that researchers should not bother trying to appreciate the nuances of meanings in the trans community, just as would be expected of researchers studying disability, race, class, or any other intersection of marginalised identity.

Awareness of the long history of transphobia in many disciplines, and as a result the feelings of alienation and suspicion of researchers on the part of trans people, can help ensure work in consumer research is sensitive to the specific concerns of trans people as a marginalised group. As Vincent (2018, 103) notes: "if a researcher is unaware of how (and by who) trans people have received ethically dubious, or even outright traumatic treatment in research contexts, there is a risk of problematic practices being repeated". In this thesis, the language used in the original source is retained in quotes and citations. Great care is taken throughout to avoid 'othering' language as much as possible; the voices of trans participants are central and should be the loudest.

1.7 Key definitions

Considering the importance of language, the following table provides some key definitions and uses in this thesis:

Table 1: Key definitions

Word or phrase	Definition and usage in thesis
Cisgender	One who identifies with gender assigned at birth, antonym of trans or transgender.
Cisnormativity, cisheteronormativity	The assumption that all or almost all individuals are cisgender, or heterosexual and cisgender. These terms can also refer to sociocultural norms of gender and sexuality, the environment in which being cisgender and heterosexual are the norm and any other identities are deviant.
Deadname	A name used prior to transition, no longer in use by a trans person.
Misgender, misgendering	To refer to someone by an incorrect gender identity, to refuse to recognise a change in gender identity.
Neopronouns	Pronouns used in place of she/her, he/him, they/them. Examples include xe/xyr, fae/faer.
Nonbinary	One of several words used to describe an experience of gender that is not in straightforward terms, used by a person

	to describe themselves where they do not fit neatly into categories of 'man', 'woman', 'male', or 'female'. Other terms include genderqueer, genderfluid, genderflux, agender, demiboy or demigirl, polygender, queer, neutrois ([Stonewall, 2021](#)).
	Note that nonbinary identities do not include culturally-specific descriptions of gender such as Two-Spirit (First Nation/Indigenous North American), māhū (Hawai'ian, Tahitian, Polynesian), hijra (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi), or travesti (Latin American, particularly used in Brazil). It is a deliberate choice not to explain these terms further; their cultural ownership does not belong to me and I do not feel it would be appropriate for me to interpret their meanings.

Trans, transgender	One who does not identify with their assigned gender at birth, antonym of cisgender.
Queer	A reclaimed term, contentious within the LGBTQ+ community due to its historical usage as an abusive slur. Queer can incorporate several aspects of a person's identity, from gender and sexuality, to political and/or philosophical stance.

In writing this thesis, I have tried to be mindful of the challenges involved with defining transgender. Given the personal nature of gender identity, labels used in definitions are often contested and can inadvertently fail to capture the subjectivities of genders. Transgender is defined by Levitt and Ippolito (2014, 1728) as "an umbrella term that refers to individuals whose gender presentation is so different from ideals for the sex assigned to them at birth that it defies traditional notions of what it means to be male or female". However, this is not a hard and fast definition. Rands (2009) draws attention to the ways in which gender-related concepts such as gender expression and gender roles are brought together under the banner of 'transgender'. They describe the misalignment of body and experience; "Transgender peoples' gender assignment does not match their gender identity" (421). For Hines and Sanger (2010, 1) "the term 'transgender' denotes a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and

presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of 'man' or 'woman'."

This definition broadens the conceptualisation of gender diversity "across, between or beyond" binary. Gender non-conformity does not always mean transgender. Valentine (2007, 33) suggests that trans may include "feminine gay men, butch lesbians" and others. However, it is often the form of one's *own* identification with transness that matters and the boundaries of trans identities remain highly contested (Sutherland, 2021). This further highlights the difficulty in describing transgender experiences within the confines of a single definition.

For the purposes of this thesis, whenever 'trans' is used, it is intended, as far as is possible, to embrace the richness and diversity of gender non-conformity. Including nonbinary, demi-, agender, and other forms of gender identity, 'trans' in this work represents a shorthand way to discuss and explore lived experiences of gender diversity. It is recognised that not all gender diverse or nonconforming people identify with the word 'trans', but that it is perhaps the most suitable word we currently have.

1.8 Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of this thesis is to investigate gender diverse consumers' experiences of consumer vulnerability. In a binary-dominated world, the ways in which those who do not fit the established norms experience vulnerability can inform both public policy and private sector businesses, seeking to reach and help improve the wellbeing of underrepresented groups. Through the lens of gender performativity,

this research seeks to improve our understanding of gender diversity in experiences of consumer vulnerability, how marketplace stigma shapes the ways in which gender in performed, and how gender diverse consumers respond to their experiences.

To help address this overall research aim, three specific objectives have been developed:

Objective 1: to understand how gender diverse consumers navigate marketplaces

This objective looks at the lived experiences of trans and gender diverse consumers in everyday life; understanding these experiences as a core part of both the vulnerability and gender performativity theoretical framings discussed earlier in this chapter. This objective seeks to build on the work of McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017) in developing our understanding of the everyday experiences of transgender consumers.

Objective 2: to understand how sociocultural, institutional, and individual factors may shape experiences of marketplace stigma and vulnerability

This objective links consumer vulnerability and stigma, in exploring the influence of market-created forces on the ways in which gender and transness comes to be conceptualised and performed. In doing so, the macro, sociocultural environment comes into play, and structural and institutional factors can be more visible for critique. This objective is grounded in the work of authors such as Mirabito et al.

(2016) and Scaraboto and Fischer (2010) looking at factors influencing stigmatisation, and papers such as those by Jafari and Visconti (2015), Thompson and Holt (2004), and Thompson and Üstüner (2015) in the areas of gender and performativity.

Objective 3: to explore how gender diverse consumers respond to consumer vulnerability

This objective focuses on the ways on which consumer responses can shape and be shaped by experiences of vulnerability. This further highlights the iterative nature of consumer vulnerability as well as adjusting the overall narrative of vulnerability towards a more positive, empowering outlook. This objective was formulated based on the writings of Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005), Hutton (2015), Saatcioglu and Corus (2016b). Through these and other works, resilience, rebellion and resistance become more visible in developing our understanding of the nuanced power relations and tensions consumers face in contexts of vulnerability.

1.9 Methodology

This exploratory study follows an interpretive research approach and social constructionist ontology. A feminist epistemology is constructive for this research in examining individual consumer perspectives of vulnerability, and taking into account shifting power dynamics taking place in social interactions. Feminist researchers acknowledge preconceptions and pre-understanding to reflect on and interrogate their own positionality and privilege, seeking out discussion and other voices as part of the research process (Linabary and Hamel, 2017). Feminist methodologies are re-

emerging in marketing and consumer research literature; as Taylor and Rupp (1991, 127) explain "a feminist perspective of the research process" is rooted in the works of scholars who fought to be heard in the 1990s, where a more holistic view of and an appreciation of gender biases in research empowered new insights into consumer experiences (see Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Woodruffe, 1996). Reflexivity in research is key to challenging assumptions and worldviews, questioning the process by which knowledge is produced. Feminist methodologies and reflexive approaches to work with (not on) transgender populations can alleviate some of the research fatigue that increased visibility has brought. Additionally, feminist research approaches which seek to balance the power dynamic in the relationship between researcher and research subject can also provide valuable insight into how vulnerability studies can be conducted to minimise negative impact (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 2005).

1.10 Approach and structure of thesis

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. Chapter Two examines consumer vulnerability, and subsequently the interrelated concepts of stigma and symbolic violence are introduced. This chapter provides the foundation for the research, exploring the literature on these social phenomena to create a landscape in which the study is situated. The different ways in which consumers experience marginalisation, oppression, and vulnerability are intertwined to highlight links between prior work and theorising on social exclusion and inequalities.

In Chapter Three, the ways in which gender has been incorporated into consumer and marketing research are examined, tracing the historical roots of our understanding

through consumer behaviour and social psychological approaches, to the more sociological, interpretive, and cultural lenses which have become a key part of the Consumer Culture Theory movement within marketing academia.

An in-depth discussion of the research methodology used in this thesis is undertaken in Chapter Four. First, the ontological and epistemological approaches of the research are discussed in more depth, looking at the exploratory nature of the study and use of qualitative methods. The rationale for combining in-depth interviews and netnography is outlined, noting the ways in which researcher fieldnotes can support these methods and the importance of reflexivity for this piece of work. Next, the collection and analysis of the data is described. In the final sections of the chapter, limitations of the methodology are considered.

Based upon language used by interview participants, the findings take an emic approach to discussing experiences and feelings of vulnerability. Marketplace distress emerged as a theme which coalesced across a range of discussions and social media posts, so this term is used throughout as one grounded in the knowledge, experiences, and stories of trans individuals. Chapters Five and Six outline the findings of the research. The focus of Chapter Five is the ways in which distress is felt in trans consumers' experiences of vulnerability and how this can impact the everyday performance of gender; individual and collective distress are explored through contexts such as marketing and media, social interactions, and family. Chapter Six looks at vulnerability and safety in consumption spaces, looking at tensions in navigating different spaces as a trans person. This includes internalised spaces such as

the trans body, and physical and online consumption spaces. Finally, consumer responses to vulnerability are considered, highlighting consumer rebellions and community responses to emerging from a position of marginalisation reveal how empowerment can be possible.

Finally, Chapter Seven concludes the thesis describing the theoretical contributions herein. This thesis contributes to three main areas of marketing literature.

The first theoretical contribution is to conceptualise marketplace distress, proposing a model which incorporates the socio-cultural environment of trans consumers alongside a variety of elements such as institutional barriers and consumer community. These can affect both the responses to and conditions of vulnerability. Additionally, the model integrates stigma in these experiences, highlighting overlaps between these two concepts.

Next, a contribution to theorising queer failure is outlined, highlighting how trans consumers can reject dominant market narratives and expectations, playing with gender in creative ways which disobey and rebel. Drawing on a sociological lens, this work offers interdisciplinary insights which can extend our understanding of the complex, interlaced, and labile concept of gender in a transgender context. This epistemological contribution looks at the nature of queer politics in transgender consumer lives, again highlighting the power of rebellion and joy in trans experiences.

The third key contribution of the thesis is in its focus on marginalised trans voices. Marginalised voices in a capitalist system are often leveraged for revenue, marshalling "identity politics for the generation of profit" while failing to dismantle or even challenge hierarchies of power (Kanai and Gill 2020, 24). At the same time, the marginalised are expected to prop up the good feelings of the dominant to 'earn' inclusion and acceptance, while being accused of 'pushing too far'. Such contradictions, in which the current culture wars are grounded, make it even more important for consumer researchers to sensitively consider our own contributions to this. Thus, while this study addresses a literature gap in consumer research through examining vulnerability in the context of trans consumers, there is extra care and attention in researching 'with', not 'on'.

The chapter then considers the managerial and policy implications of the research. Here, the role of marketing and policy in shaping sociocultural environments for marginalised consumers is critiqued. The role of language is revisited, describing how inclusive language and representation in marketing and media can be hugely meaningful and positive.

Finally, areas of future research are considered, thinking about ways in which to deepen and enrich of our understandings of gender, vulnerability, and intersectionality in consumer experiences.

2. CONSUMER VULNERABILITY

2.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at how consumer vulnerability has been defined in the marketing and consumer research disciplines, exploring how influential definitions and diverging perspectives have shaped research in this area. It also discusses the various dimensions and axes on which vulnerability has been and could be investigated, noting the challenges therein. Additionally, stigma and symbolic violence are examined, to highlight the ways in which these are related and linked to one another. The chapter then goes on to examine wider implications of consumer vulnerability research, looking at how social policy and power dynamics in society more broadly can affect experiences of vulnerability. Finally, the chapter looks at how consumers have responded to experiences of vulnerability, drawing on studies of consumer coping and resilience.

Researchers are increasingly investigating the social consequences of consumption, contributing to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), critical marketing and Transformative Consumer Research (TCR), and working with vulnerable populations in a variety of marketing contexts (Jafari et al., 2013). Studies are asking what circumstances or characteristics make vulnerable consumers, how do we manage our vulnerabilities, what does vulnerability mean to consumer identity? In doing so, researchers are looking not only to the individual but wider social and cultural factors which constrain, liberate and influence consumption behaviour.

The complexity of consumer vulnerability makes it a challenging phenomenon to address, with the restrictions of an academic paper placing practically necessary boundaries on research. This also means however that there is opportunity to keep going, pushing micro, meso and macro level analysis of vulnerability further. The following section looks at how current consumer vulnerability literature has conceptualised and critiqued this phenomenon.

2.2 Definitions of "consumer vulnerability"

The most commonly cited definition of consumer vulnerability comes from Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005, 134), and looks to address a prior lack of clarity around what exactly consumer vulnerability signified by incorporating different aspects of how vulnerability is experienced:

"a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products"

Much of the work undertaken prior to the publication of this definition covers macro and micro level factors, but approaches consumer vulnerability by looking at the group experiencing it, categorising consumers through a shared characteristic which may indicate susceptibility to vulnerability (e.g. low income or disability). Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) argue that vulnerability should not be solely defined by biophysical or psychosocial traits, which influence how consumers interact with marketing communications and messaging according to cultural background. Nor should it be defined solely by individual states, such as grief, and external factors such

as stigma, economic or social conditions, or political instability. Nor should it be defined only by the physical and logistical elements of consumption which may affect vulnerability, such as the accessibility of shops or retail spaces for those with a disability. The model, shown below, brings together all of these factors and examples of external factors are discussed in relation to policymaking. The systemic and structural factors are not unpacked in more depth here, or discussed as interlinked pressures which contribute to vulnerability in this conceptualisation. This was not the main focus of the model, and these factors are explored in other works.
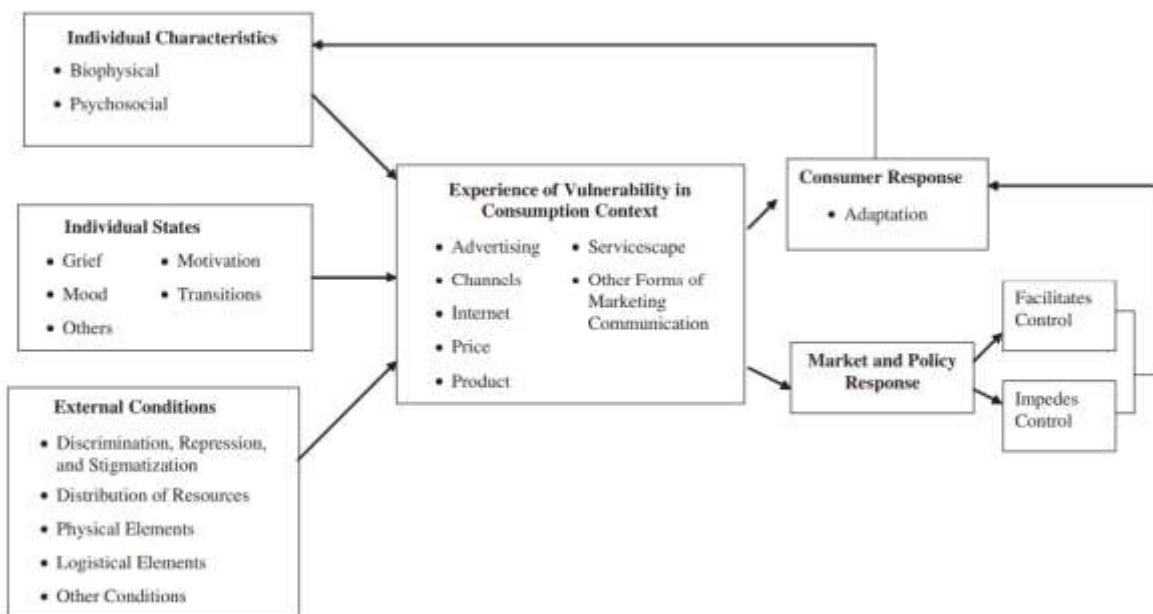
Figure 1: Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) model

Researchers have embraced the above definition in exploring different dimensions of consumer vulnerability. The table below shows how variously and similarly consumer vulnerability has been characterised, and aims to develop Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg's approach:

Table 2: Definitions of vulnerability

Definition of consumer vulnerability	Source	Interpretation of definition
"While certain personal characteristics mean that some groups are at a higher risk of finding themselves in a vulnerable position, it is the context rather than personal characteristics that determines vulnerability."	Canhoto and Dibb, 2016 (336)	These definitions are focused on the consumer's self; the experience of vulnerability is characteristic of an individual's circumstances or personal qualities, such as lack of knowledge or capacity in negotiating the marketplace. The vulnerability is context dependent, occurring at times of stress or due to external forces which are out of the
"vulnerability is due to a transformation of the self that forces them to face new consumer roles when they are least prepared to do so because of the associated stresses"	Gentry *et al.*, 1995 (129)	
"Vulnerable consumers fail to understand their own preferences and/or lack the knowledge, skills, or freedom (i.e., personal prerogatives	Ringold, 2005 (202)	

and marketplace options) to act on them."		consumer's control. The feelings of powerlessness and not having a voice are emphasised.
"Consumers often lack a degree of control and agency within service contexts. Service consumers are frequently at a disadvantage, especially in their lack of expertise compared with service providers in the case, for example, of health care and financial services."	Anderson *et al.*, 2013 (1204)	Similarly, these definitions are focused on the resources available to the consumer for negotiating the vulnerability; a lack of agency affects how consumers are able to
"These processes [of production, acquisition and consumption] are especially challenging for people who find that they lack the resources necessary to perform consumer roles...	Piacentini, Hibbert and Hogg, 2014 (202)	cope with vulnerability and this impacts their own resources in doing so. It is this lack of resources such as knowledge which

where consumers suffer multiple and severe resource constraints, there are serious implications for personal welfare"		causes the experience of vulnerability – the emphasis is on the individual consumer.
"people are doubly vulnerable if they do not know what is good for them and do not have the resources to acquire it anyway"	Shultz and Holbrook, 2009 (125)	
"Vulnerability necessitates that individuals and/or collectives are dependent on external sources to assist in relieving the threat. Thus, vulnerability is powerlessness and dependence embedded in complex social, ecological and material relations and processes."	Baker (2009) in Baker and Mason, 2012 (547)	These definitions look to both macro and individual forces which impact the experience of vulnerability, recognising that vulnerability occurs
"Vulnerability is a state of human existence characterized by	Baker & Mason (2012) in Mason and Pavia, 2014 (7)	through a complex combination of circumstances,

powerlessness and lack of control"		characteristics and contexts. The feelings of powerlessness can be attributed to a lack of resources which in certain contexts means that the individual becomes vulnerable, but this vulnerability is a fluid state and is not determined by one aspect alone.
"[Conceptualisations of vulnerability] include experiences of voicelessness and powerlessness, feelings of vulnerability and ex-ante risk exposure, and the subjective experiences of ill-being and well-being"	(Chakravarti, 2006 (365)	
"while everyone has the potential to be vulnerable, vulnerability is not an automatic by-product of an individual state, characteristic, or external condition; it must include an experiential element of the consumer being powerless to achieve a market goal."	Pavia and Mason, 2014 (472)	

These interpretations of consumer vulnerability are similar to those conceptualised in

Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg's model; individual characteristics and states refer to the

self, and external conditions to resources. The model separates consumer, market and policy responses, which are discussed in later sections here. Both the table above and the Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg model bring together multiple aspects of vulnerability. Additionally, the first group of definitions use the word 'stress', a theoretical underpinning which is employed and discussed in more depth by Hutton (2015). Here, the author uses stress to "explore the gendered complexities of economic disadvantage" (ibid, 1695), in other words, looking at events, conditions and social factors which contribute to emotional strain and worry in everyday life. Although Hutton's study focuses on the experiences of diverse groups of women in poverty, the parallels with consumer vulnerability merit its inclusion in considering definitions of the latter.

Although frequently cited, the Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg definition is by no means the only way to conceptualise vulnerability. Systemic and institutional factors are integrated into a macro-marketing focused conceptualisation of vulnerability in Commuri and Ekici's (2008) work expanding on this model. For further insight on these factors, Schultz and Holbrook (2009) offer a typology of vulnerability in terms of economic and cultural vulnerability, whereby consumers' access to beneficial means and knowledge of beneficial relationships determines the type of vulnerability experienced. In a more recent publication, Hill and Sharma (2020, 551) define consumer vulnerability as "a state in which consumers are subject to harm because their access to and control over resources are restricted in ways that significantly inhibit their ability to function in the marketplace". The different perspectives on what exactly is consumer vulnerability seem to stem from debate on the antecedents and

consequences of vulnerability; it can be "both personal and structural in nature" (Khare and Jain 2022, 567). The terms 'consumer vulnerability' and 'vulnerable consumer' have sometimes been used interchangeably, a practice which Hill and Sharma (2020) warn can lead to potential misuse and misunderstanding.

How then, can consumer vulnerability be defined for the purpose of this thesis? Here, the research takes inspiration from a paper which specifically relates to both the theoretical foundation and context of the current work. McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017) supplement the Baker, Rittenburg and Gentry (2005) model in the context of transgender consumers, expanding out the macro level forces affecting vulnerability, and conceptualising vulnerability as cyclical, rather than feedback loops. Shi et al. (2017, 772) take a contrasting approach, using an individual perspective to develop a measurable scale of vulnerability, and taking a subjective view where previous literature has been objective. They offer their own definition of vulnerability:

"an individual characteristic that refers to a tendency to make decisions that will damage one's welfare when stimulated or tempted by external factors in a consumption situation"

This definition is focused on loss of welfare due to limited knowledge or an inability to choose the best option due to factors such social pressure or purchase ability. The emphasis in this definition is on the consumer's passivity, where they are making poor decisions which impact their welfare when responding to external stimulus or factors. Using this definition, the consumer is merely influenced by factors outside their

control, and has no power or means with which to cope, resist or develop resilience in the face of vulnerability. The focus here is on the individual, rather than encompassing the collective or group perspective of vulnerability. The approach taken in this study aims to recognise consumers' potential agency and power in vulnerability, while still acknowledging where individuals may be affected by external factors. In addition, it is noted that an individual perspective, despite here embracing macro influences in the environment of consumer experiences, may minimise other important dimensions of identity such as race and class. These dimensions can also contribute to vulnerability, but are not the main focus of the current research.

There is also a difference in the perception of vulnerability and the actual experience of vulnerability; consumers may perceive vulnerability where they experience difficulty in undertaking a 'normal' behaviour, such as shopping. Consumers with visual impairments must overcome barriers in the marketplace when shopping as there is an assumption that consumers are sighted and do not need an adaption such as shopping with a companion to interpret information or navigate a store (Baker, 2006). Thus, although shopping is a core everyday activity, visually impaired consumers may perceive themselves to be vulnerable in doing so because they must adapt and respond to barriers. They are then also subject to perceptions of vulnerability from other consumers, who make assumptions about the disabled person's capacity or independence.

Consumers are constantly making judgements on their own and others' competence in consumption situations, and their sense of self can be both positively and negatively

affected by these perceptions. This is not only present in the current moment, but can also impact on future perceptions of themselves (McKeage, Crosby & Rittenburg, 2017). If vulnerability is a dynamic but temporary state, the potential for altered future perceptions could also affect the experience, further exacerbating the feeling of vulnerability and thus creating almost a feedback loop. The social self-concept (how others see 'me') could also feed into this feedback loop, whereby a negatively viewed consumption behaviour such as smoking invokes a feeling that detrimental labels are assigned to the person undertaking that behaviour (Hamilton and Hassan, 2010).

The perception that their self-concept is being adversely affected, as well as emphasising the vulnerability, could in reality be incorrect. Distinguishing between 'actual' vulnerability, which can only be captured by speaking to the person experiencing it, and 'perceived' vulnerability, when others think that someone is vulnerable even though this may not be the case, is important for researchers as it impacts at a macro-level as well as affecting the individual (Baker, Stephens and Hill, 2001). For an individual, their actual vulnerability could help them to address perceptions of their vulnerability by showing other consumers how they cope with consumption situations. This was shown in findings with visually impaired consumers who more readily accepted the vulnerability caused by their disability (Falchetti, Ponchio and Botelho, 2016). These participants were able to disrupt perceived vulnerability by demonstrating that they have gained independence in shopping for themselves.

Elms and Tinson (2012) examine 'actual' vulnerability in the context of disability through a multi-approach case study of a disabled consumer's grocery shopping behaviours. Contrasting online and offline shopping experiences, the case study looks at how 'Danni' preserves her sense of self as a mother and housewife when she experiences vulnerability in accessing retail spaces online and in store, her coping mechanisms and strategies (such as shopping with her husband Rob, choosing online retailers based on the reliability of their products for her meal planning, and purchasing from stores where disabled facilities and staff are available).

Piacentini, Hibbert and Hogg (2014) investigated how care leavers manage the transition into adult life, compensating for how their status affects achievement of their consumption goals. Although these consumers may be perceived to have few resources, they can still navigate the marketplace in beneficial ways when given appropriate support. Their actual vulnerability in being low income, low resource consumers can be addressed despite their perceived vulnerability as being automatically less capable due to their circumstances. Thus, in both studies, consumers who are in vulnerable positions can utilise available support (through shopping alongside a companion, for instance) to take advantage of the market and still participate as consumers in a capitalist society.

From briefly looking at the number of vulnerability definitions and understandings as outlined above, it becomes apparent that there are an equivalent number of influences on experiences of vulnerability. These include individual and personal traits or characteristics, and environmental, structural and social factors. The following

sections will discuss stigma, symbolic violence, structure and agency, and consumer responses.

2.3 Everyday vulnerabilities: stigma and symbolic violence

2.3.1 Stigma

Similar to vulnerability, there has been an abundance of definitions of stigma due to its complexity (Link and Phelan, 2001). The most well-established is Goffman's (1986, 139) definition of stigma as "a means of formal social control". Goffman has also described stigma as marginalisation of people and social groups on the basis of personal attributes different from dominant values (Goffman, 1990), which may be manifested physically through disability, gender, or age, visibly through race or ethnicity, or invisibly through behaviour, sexual orientation or mental health (Mirabito et al., 2016). Individual experiences of stigma are further influenced by macro-level forces which are external to the consumer, reinforced through social interactions. In their conceptual review of stigma and prejudice, Phelan, Link and Dovidio (2008) argue that the three functions of stigma and prejudice are exploitation, norm enforcement and avoidance. This creates the dynamic of in-group, out-group, where "dominant groups stereotype and label other groups not only as different but also as socially less" (Eichert and Luedicke 2022, 2). This emphasises the role of what Link and Phelan (2014) define as stigma power, which refers to the ways in which "stigma processes achieve the aims of stigmatizers with respect to the exploitation, control or exclusion of others" (Link and Phelan 2014, 24).

This sociological work informs how stigma is conceptualised in marketing and consumer research, beginning with the work of Goffman and developing alongside sociology's disciplinary definitions and understandings. Marketing scholars have explored stigma in a variety of contexts, from subcultures (Kozinets, 2001), coupon use (Argo and Main, 2008), discounts for pensioners (Tepper, 1994), consumers with low levels of literacy (Adkins and Ozanne, 2005), and trailer park residency (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2010). However, Mirabito et al. (2016) point out that the literature on marketplace stigma is fragmented and Crosby (2012, 58) concurs, calling the body of consumer research work on stigma "disjointed". Despite this dispersion, much of the stigma work in marketing looks at individual perspectives, and the management of and responses to, stigma and stereotyping on consumers. Macro level consumer research studies are fewer (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2010). Additionally, Crocket (2017, 555) remarks that everyday management of stigmatisation, the "far less dramatic acts" (in the context of managing racism), are often overlooked in research, such that the contribution of structural factors in everyday experiences of stigma is also overlooked.

It is also important to consider the reciprocal roles of media and the marketplace in shaping cultural attitudes, especially attitudes towards and (de)stigmatization of marginalised communities and identities. Mirabito et al (2016, 171) discuss the "complex relationship between stigma and the marketplace", conceptualising a turbine fuelled by contextual currents which can increase or decrease stigma. The blades of the turbine are the targets of stigma, namely individuals, society or the marketplace, and the turbine itself is fuelled by historical, sociocultural, institutional, and commercial currents. In offering the stigma turbine as a conceptual framework for

investigating marketplace stigma, the authors point to how sociocultural institutions reinforce norms and social codes, and note "the need for research and public policy agendas dedicated to improving consumer welfare and social justice" (ibid, 171). The stigma turbine encompasses both the targets of stigma and the factors which contribute to (de)stigmatisation. In this conceptualisation, stigma is viewed through an intersectionality lens to better understand overlap and connections between multiple stigmatised identities, and noting how the sociocultural environment contributes to stigma. The blades also intersect, illustrating the ways in which societal, marketplace and individuals "coproduce and codify values, beliefs and motivations that affect the ways stigma is felt" (ibid, 172).
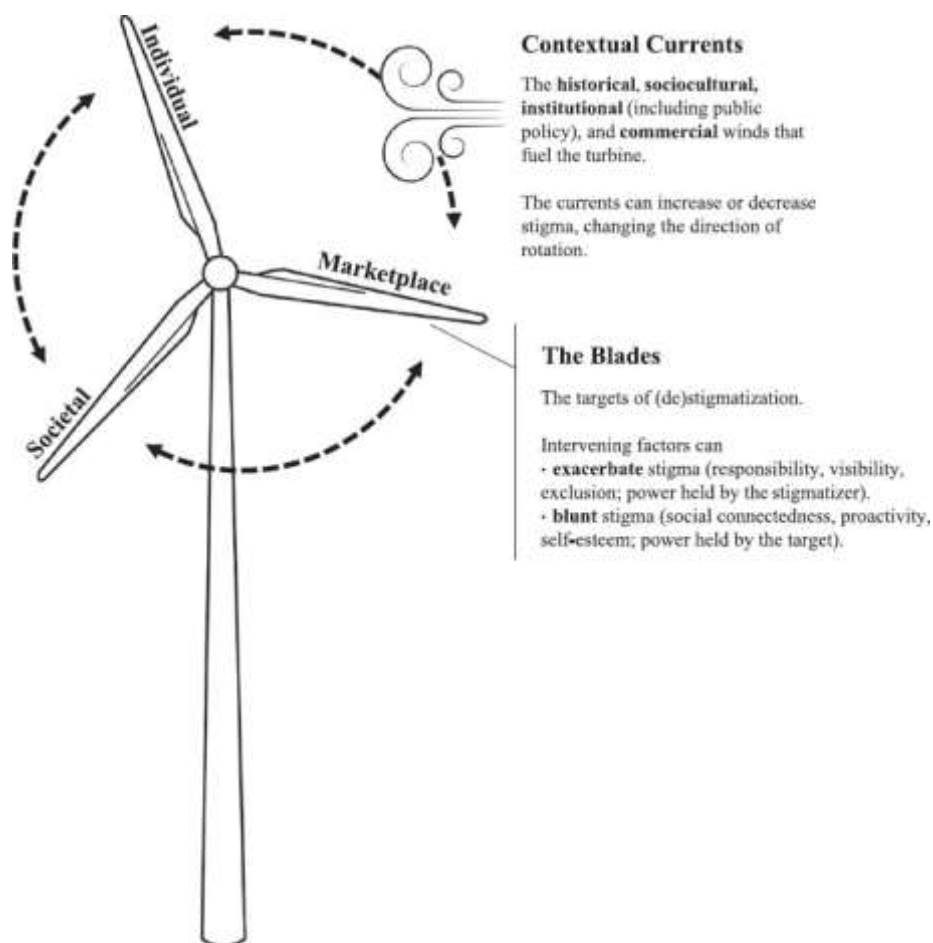
Figure 2 Stigma turbine (Mirabito et al., 2016)

The authors argue that the stigma turbine "provides a clear metaphoric representation of key forces within and across cultures that can foster (de)stigmatisation" (Mirabito et al. 2016, 182). This conceptual framework also centres the role of the marketplace in contributing to and alleviating stigma, identifying how marketers can disrupt stigma by prominently showing similarities rather than differences between groups. However, this puts a responsibility on marketers to communicate appropriately and clearly through media and sociocultural noise. The authors also offer the Stigma Audit as a tool for those interested in consumer welfare to promote destigmatisation through their marketing policies, but briefly note that there will be those who will stall doing so until forced by changes in legislation or due to external pressure which affects profit margins. This highlights how marketers can wield sociocultural power and that, despite the hard work of individuals to combat stigma and stereotypes, there remain broader challenges to any form of work in inequalities and wellbeing.

Building on Mirabito et al.'s (2016) point that the "cognitive, affective and behavioural process, guided by the social or situational determinants of the stigma" shape and influence devalued identities and responses, Barrios and Blocker (2012, 103) explain that stereotypes are dependent on "social, economic, political, and cultural power". Thus the effects of stigma are shaped by the extent to which the stigma is internalised by the individual. Interestingly, Crockett (2017, 562) finds stigma management to be "largely intersubjective", finding that their black middle class informants "interpret and frame stigma largely through the lens of racial uplift ideology", creating their own narratives in order to make every day experiences less insufferable.

According to Orne (2013), scholarship on identity management has focused on only two responses to revealing a stigmatised identity, either acceptance or hostility. The author further argues that this tendency emulates popular culture, where depictions of stigmatised identities generate an either/or reaction. Low (2020) disagrees somewhat, noting that media narratives of disabled bodies have changed towards more positive portrayals and normalisation, and that celebration of diversity can be a useful form of stigma management. Perceptions of stigma through media narratives also appear to vary; Chung and Slater's (2013) study on entertainment narratives found less social acceptance for a highly stigmatised identity than for a less stigmatised one (looking at drug addiction). Mass media is an important source of information on stigmatised identities; according to Wahl (2004), it has been a key source of information about mental illness, with news media being of particular note in reproducing negative depictions (Wahl, 1999). Further, marketing communications can unintentionally contribute consumers' perception of a stigma, as wellbeing can be negatively affected and consumers nudged towards high-risk choices by a single advertising image (Harmeling et al., 2021).

Negative portrayals in media contributing to stigma is not limited to mental health, as Worrell (2018) draws attention to entertainment media's portrayals of disability where characters such as Sheldon Cooper in sitcom the Big Bang Theory are often the cause of ridicule. Health stigmas have been a significant focus of literature in social psychology, social health and sociology, with studies exploring obesity, mental health conditions like depression and schizophrenia, HIV and chronic illness (Veer, 2009; Levy and Pilver, 2012; Vogel et al., 2013; Brewis, 2014). Further, social media has been

examined for its role in exacerbating and combatting stigma; trivialisation of mental health was found to be common, however users were also able to challenge stigma, forcing retailers to remove a 'mental health patient' Halloween costume from sale (Betton et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2019). Further complication of stigma management comes in cases where communities have made progress in combatting a stigma and thus are no longer subject to the same degree of discrimination as in the past. Eichert and Luedicke (2022) explore this fragmented stigma, showing how stigmatised identities can shift and change over time.

In addition to social theory perspectives employed to explore individual stigma experiences, researchers have investigated how stigma can extend beyond the marginalised individual. Courtesy stigma taints the people around a stigmatised individual through their association and connections, and has implications for how those people are treated in addition to the stigmatised person (Pryor, Reeder and Monroe, 2012). In their experimental study of courtesy stigma (or stigma by association), Argo and Main (2008, 559) draw attention to ways in which the behaviours of others can "thwart" the efforts of consumers to avoid being stigmatised. Lui and Kozinets (2022) explore the ways in which stigmatised consumers use counter narratives to tackle courtesy stigma. The authors discuss consumption practices and identity work at play in these counter narratives, where unmarried women conspicuously use fashion and appearance to create a visual counter narrative for family who view them as unsuccessful due to their single status. The paper suggests that the participants in the study "deploy the power of the market system and utilize the symbolic, aesthetic, social and moral capital that it provides" (ibid, 17), showing

not only the importance of power in (re)producing stigmas but also that power can shift towards the stigmatised themselves.

Feminist critiques of marketing have discussed the need to focus on welfare and social justice; feminist researchers seek to question power dynamics, arguing that inadequacies in mainstream philosophical dichotomies privilege one of a pair (e.g. male perspectives privileged over female) (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 2000). Critiquing the role of consumption in culture, Siebler (2012, 96) states that "consumption is a way of life, a way to validate one's existence, a way to display one's status and worth... The Digital Age has obliterated the transqueers who embrace the borderlands of gender fluidity and replaced it with "gender as consumption." This critique again highlights the power and role of marketing in individual lives, where consumption has transgressed so deeply into identity that gender is itself a consumer product.

It is important not to underestimate the ways in which consumers can defy stigmatisation in marketplace contexts, employing consumption practices as a tool of socioeconomic influence (Thompson, 2014), and how stigmatised communities are able to trouble social hierarchies (Johnson, Thomas and Grier, 2017). Although a community may be stigmatised more broadly, it does not necessarily follow that each individual member of that community automatically experiences stigma as well (Harvey, 2001). This however requires individuals to possess the power and the facility to recognise the subtle processes of stigma, which often go misrecognised.

This discussion now turns to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and the ways in which his concept of symbolic violence can be linked to experiences of stigma. Although Bourdieu's writing has been extensively used in consumer research, the links to vulnerability and stigma in lived experiences is less clearly defined in previous research.

2.3.2 Symbolic violence

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work (1989, 2003) on power and domination explores the domain of the symbolic as opposed to the overt physical nature of violence in a society. His definition explains symbolic violence as: "any power that manages to impose meanings and impose them by disguising the power imbalance that underpins its strength" (Bourdieu 1977, 18, quoted in Tiercelin & Remy (2019)). Bourdieu endeavours to explain how hierarchies and inequalities in social life are maintained through symbolic domination; the power to "define value and construct the world with authority" (Atkinson 2020, 49) lies with those most recognised as 'superior'. The underlying power relations in social structures mask how certain groups within society come to be marginalised, as subordinating practices and ideas become absorbed into the domain of the socially acceptable; the 'rules' and 'norms' are also reproduced by the marginalised themselves (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius and Sanghera, 2016).

Bourdieu's work explores "why it is that many forms of domination persist with relatively few challenges" (Chambers 2005, 327). His framework for understanding the persistence of social inequalities follows his ideas for theory and method to work

harmoniously; one cannot be explained without the other. Through his theorising of power and domination, Bourdieu establishes the social world as boundaried by an individual's habitus; a person's internalised cultural landscape is made up of the social values, norms, and resources available to them. The habitus is not static but dynamic, changing and developing as the individual navigates through and in their society. The concept of habitus is for Bourdieu both an analytical tool and a research methodology, in line with his lifelong pursuit of integrating theory and practice in researching the social world.

The habitus of an individual is created through the norms, values and resources available through socialisation, from childhood experiences and family upbringing, and through schooling and education. These experiences together provide the individual with "stocks of generalized cultural capital" (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013, 19); depending on the position in the social hierarchy, cultural capital can be converted to economic and social capital. Social roles are context-specific, depending on the type and circumstance or situation of the social interaction. All of these elements work to maintain the dominant belief systems and values of the social world, with each individual striving for legitimacy within that dominant system of socially acceptable ways of being, thinking, doing, and interacting with others (the norms and values). The habitus unconsciously reproduces and reinforces the 'natural' state of things, 'the way things are', the illusion of the 'natural' essence of values, norms and practices is entirely arbitrary: "the most crucial aspect of habitus is that it naturalises itself and the cultural rules, agendas, and values that make it possible" (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002, 43).

Symbolic violence (or symbolic power, - the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably in Bourdieu's writing (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017)) refers to the lived experiences and feelings of stigmatization, devaluation, and illegitimacy of marginalised groups in society. These feelings of anxiety, awkwardness, shame and so on work on the individual both through the objective hardship of being marginalised, and also through the subjective experience of the individual, whereby they self-blame, self-police and so on in their efforts to resist symbolic domination. The extent to which this is possible for a given individual is entirely dependent on the amount and type of resources (cultural, economic, symbolic) available to them – as Samuel (2013) points out, "the durable conditions... do little to provide the resources necessary to resist" (403).

Bourdieu discusses this in terms of everyday practices, showing how symbolic violence goes unnoticed through what he explains as misrecognition. Power relations are disguised such that those who experience symbolic violence fail to recognise it as an act of domination, and unwittingly reproduce the dominant norms and values through their social interactions. Given the dynamic nature of the social world, this means that the subtle effect of symbolic violence reinforces its' legitimacy, working through gradual acceptance of what may have previously been seen as socially unacceptable. Power relations are disguised such that those who experience symbolic violence fail to recognise it as an act of domination, and unwittingly reproduce the dominant norms and values through their social interactions. As Morgan and Björkert (2006, 448) suggest, "symbolic violence is so powerful precisely because it is unrecognisable for

what it is." Whilst misrecognition can occur across different contexts of power relations, Bourdieu (1996) suggests that acts of misrecognition are more central to symbolic violence within the case of gender domination than any other. Atkinson (2016) explains further that gender is a phenomenon of multiple fields, where one's experience of being gendered is shaped by both the specific position of masculinity or femininity, but also the relationship between these two in social spaces. A relevant example is Ourahmoune and Özçağlar-Toulouse's (2012, 96) research that reveals how Kabyle women are willingly complicit with structuring patriarchal forces in a way that maintains social order so that "the circulation or exchange of women remains under male control." The alignment between social structures and mental structures is evident of a "*sense of limits*" (Bourdieu 1994, 159) whereby "the agents' aspirations have the same limits as the objective conditions of which they are the product" (161).

McRobbie (2004) discusses this in detail by examining reality TV programmes and the ways in which working class women are denigrated in these. Contrasting the representations of working class women and the middle class presenters who are higher up in the social hierarchy, she points to the inevitable failure of participants to climb the ladder, so to speak; "there is no suggestion that the victims will every truly belong to the same social group as their improvers" (104). Marginalised groups strive to achieve legitimacy within a social system that will never allow them to be successful; the resources and power to disrupt and challenge dominant systems can be constrained by institutional and structural factors, thus further reinforcing domination.

Misrecognition of symbolic violence means that "practices that would ordinarily be deemed as problematic or 'violent' eventually gain social acceptance through particular discourses, practices and policies" (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius and Sanghera 2016, 149). Social domination and the marginalisation of certain groups is thus self-sustaining. This does not mean that there is no resistance on the parts of the marginalised, indeed reflexivity is also a key concept in Bourdieu's theorising of power. This does however speak to the persistence of social inequalities, considering clandestine power relations in the ordinariness of everyday life – "symbolic violence is so powerful precisely because it is unrecognisable for what it is" (Morgan and Björkert 2006, 448). Bourdieu (1996, 199) suggests, there is always room for "cognitive struggles" that question the undisputed and "brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation" (Bourdieu 1994, 164). A prime example is Vikas, Varman and Belk's (2015) analysis of how subordinates can neutralize the symbolic violence of the elite following a process of marketization that calls into question the relevance of prior dispositions. Nevertheless, notions of gender are deeply entrenched, meaning that they are often at odds with the realities of contemporary culture (McNay 1999).

A criticism of Bourdieu's writings is that he gives little attention to the relationship between gender and capital, and particularly the ways in which gender may itself be a form of capital (Thorpe, 2009). Reproducing traditional binaries in the division of labour between men and women, with masculinity the public (economic) side and femininity the private (cultural, domestic) side, Bourdieu's view of gender as a form of capital is unclear (Skeggs, 2004). He does consider gender to be a construct embodied

in the individual's habitus which produces a gendered view of the world. As much feminist research has established, the omnipotence of gender in all social interactions is axiomatic (Krais, 2006). This is reflected in the normative nature of gender in consumption contexts; often reduced to a simple male/female dichotomy (Arsel, Eräranta and Moisander, 2015), gender is a key part of consumer identity. Identity as proposed by markets, advertising or brands create a conformity of consumption practices to that identity ideal (Tiercelin and Remy, 2019). Drawing on Bourdieu's understanding of habitus as a generative structure that is "lived," McNay (1999, 101) draws attention to the "potential creativity" within the reproduction of gender identity. This highlights the temporal dimension of the habitus and the dynamic and open-ended nature of dominant gender norms. On the one hand, this can reinforce the social domination and marginalisation of certain groups, and on the other hand, it can open up space for the destabilization of conventional practices.

In consumer research, Bourdieu's work has been employed to explore habitus and different forms of capital in a variety of ways; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) write that there have been two main streams of consumer cultural capital research, one looking at how cultural capital influences consumption choices and tastes, and another exploring cultural capital in consumption communities and subcultures. Additionally, the authors note that "sociologically oriented consumer research building on Bourdieu's theoretical legacy has extensively documented how consumption practices reproduce status distinctions" (36). In their study, they investigate status and cultural capital in terms of at-home fathers' marginalising experience of gender identity.

Much consumer cultural work has adopted Bourdieu's theorizing to explore the reproduction of social inequalities and social hierarchies (Holt 1998, Allen 2002, Üstüner and Thompson 2012). Importantly, prior work has established that the habitus is not static but dynamic, changing and developing as the individual navigates through and in their society, for example, Saatcioglu and Ozanne's (2013) research on the evolvement of moral habitus during secondary socialization in adulthood. Other researchers have investigated symbolic expressions of masculine identities in brand communities, cultural capital in 'nerd' and LGBT+ subculture, and appropriations of working class consumption objects as forms of cultural capital (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001; Kates, 2002; Arsel and Thompson, 2011). Velagaleti (2017) explores the impact of social change on consumer legitimacy through the lens of symbolic violence.

Identity is constantly reinvented in response to life stages, cultural practices and social environments (Lawler, 2015; Ruvio and Belk, 2013). There are many threads forming identity, or even part of an identity, that can be impacted by an experience of vulnerability. The relationships between these are complex. Researchers can try to address this through taking an intersectional approach, however this in itself is a complex undertaking. The multidimensionality of vulnerability is sometimes overlooked due to its challenging nature, as researchers attempt to address only one state or dimension in their studies. However, wider social, cultural and environmental factors should not be discounted as influencing how consumers of a particular identity experience vulnerability. For trans consumers, vulnerability is often multiplied by

forms of structural violence preventing full access to healthcare, employment, education and housing. The following section will look at these structural issues in more detail.

2.4 Structure and agency

In parallel with the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) stream of research, Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) looks to the societal influence of consumer research, and how such research can affect socio-political and structural change towards empowerment and wellbeing for all members of society. In introducing transformative ideas and adopting innovative approaches to consumer research, the stream draws on the insight from intersectionality that each person in a social group is positioned at the intersection of multiple identity axes (e.g. race, gender, social class, health status). Thus, we are all subject to multiple overlapping advantages or disadvantages (Corus et al., 2016). The authors assert in their study of poverty policy that "groups of vulnerable people can be overlooked at the margins of society and fall outside the domain of poverty policies due to the omission of intersecting factors" (ibid, 211). Through both CCT and TCR, consumer researchers are recognising and beginning to address the structural factors which impact vulnerability, encouraging deeper understanding of the consumer's own sense of agency in these experiences. This also enables researchers to make recommendations to policy makers, consumer welfare groups, and other stakeholders.

Turning first to the structural factors of the marketplace itself, Bennett et al. (2016) explore marketplace omission and commission as sources of collective trauma. In this

article, the authors distinguish between the ways in which marketers misrepresent or stereotype individuals or groups, and fail entirely to take into account the perspectives of those who are subject to some form of social stigma or 'othering'. Marketplace omission refers to "behaviours by marketers that chronically fail to engage, intervene, acknowledge, and/or include the experiences and perspectives of diverse individuals and groups" (ibid, 283). The authors' concept of omission then, concedes the relative position of power and privilege that the institution of marketing occupies, such that it is more often than not "composed of and favour[s] the dominant in-group" (283). This seems to suggest an unanticipated lack of awareness; the institution fails to recognise how reflecting itself, it's marketing mix behaviours, values, and practices, affords privilege to those in-groups of which it is made up. In contrast, marketplace commission admits that there are behaviours at a structural level which result in discrimination and stereotyping of individuals and groups. This often takes the form of "explicit misrepresentation or mistreatment in a marketing message or the design and delivery of marketplace interactions" (285). Both omission in its ignorance and commission in its denigration could contribute to consumer vulnerability, creating a potentially antagonistic marketplace with which consumers may be reluctant to engage.

Policy makers also influence structural vulnerability, so that consumer vulnerability is not created solely through consumers' lack of engagement with the marketplace, but also other factors beyond personal circumstances (Stearn, 2016). Assumptions can be challenged through looking at environmental factors such as limited low-cost housing, unemployment and store location in particular geographical areas, factors which an

individual cannot control, but affect the condition of homelessness (Baker, LaBarge and Baker, 2016). Emphasis on individual responsibility, where the vulnerability is perceived to be the fault of the person experiencing it, reinforces that vulnerability. This occurs to an even greater degree when the idea that vulnerability is created through an individual's own choices is exploited in media narratives, and through behaviours of companies which target and exploit low-income consumers through high interest rates and "poverty tax" (Hamilton et al., 2014). The perception that the individual is accountable for their vulnerability contradicts the historical development of social policy, which arose from a recognition that discrimination created vulnerability and restricted individual consumer freedoms (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2005).

If vulnerability is experienced through a set of variables or external factors across a group of individuals, then policy makers can work towards mitigating this, rather than merely reacting to individual states of vulnerability (Commuri and Ekici, 2008). Further, Commuri & Ekici (2008) critique the assertion of Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) that as vulnerability triggers are external, grouping a class of consumers together as vulnerable is unnecessary. They suggest that doing so removes agency from policy making, so it becomes reactive rather than proactive. Instead of disregarding demographic variables, the authors propose an integrative view of consumer vulnerability which they express as an equation representing total vulnerability, systemic vulnerability, and transient vulnerability. Using characteristics such as sex, education and race as markers of vulnerability has been criticised as promoting stigma, but that there is still value in using these labels through re-

examining them to capture breadth, for example literacy within the label of education (Ringold, 2005).

Policy cannot account for individualised vulnerability; given the complexity of vulnerability experiences, determining which characteristics or states make a person most vulnerable is problematic. This complexity goes some way to explaining generic legislative responses, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 1990. The ADA assumes that all disabled people face the same or similar challenges, which discounts people's own levels of dependence or independence, thus removing individual agency (Baker, Stephens and Hill, 2001).

Social policy on paper looks at different factors but in practice, focuses on a state of vulnerability which assumes that individuals cannot take care of themselves and so state intervention is required, again removing individual agency (Brown, 2011). However, a moral argument can be made that society has a duty to look after those most in need, so some form of action must be taken at a structural level to counteract factors which affect the creation of vulnerability in the first place. Policy makers are themselves constrained in acting to respond to vulnerability, and so attempt to address it within the scope of their ability and knowledge, similarly to consumers responding to vulnerability through coping mechanisms and by developing resilience. The equilibrium of acknowledging individual agency and effective policy intervention is extremely tricky to balance. The next part of this literature review will look at responses to vulnerability from a more individualised perspective, bearing in mind the broader structural and institutional challenges that the community frequently faces.

2.5 Consumer responses to vulnerability

Consumer responses to vulnerability can be both passive and active, and overlap with macro responses. McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017) use the word "resolve" rather than remediate when discussing fixed states which cause vulnerability, i.e. conditions in which vulnerability cannot be mediated, as this implies a return to a previous state which may not always be desired. Responses manifest through various forms of coping, which has been conceptualised as an individual's response to a stressor, affected by both personal and environmental factors (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; in Duhachek and Iacobucci, 2005).

Differentiation between coping resources and strategies in traditional coping literature, where resources are drawn upon by consumers to address stressful situations and strategies are patterns of behaviour to handle these, has meant that two types of coping have been identified. Problem-solving coping is cognitive and based on behaviour, as opposed to coping based on emotion (Duhachek, 2005). In their study of Italian middle class women, Cappellini et al. (2014) note that in times of recession, the emotional labour of coping may bolster 'wife and mother' identities for women, and point out traditional inequalities in household management which appear to mean that wives bear more responsibility than husbands for wellbeing in the home. This contrasting problem vs emotion approach is problematic for studies of gendered consumer behaviour. As emotion is typically seen as feminine, women are assumed to rely on this form of coping and to be less able to develop effective coping strategies; "These representations [men as rational, women as emotional] obscure the varied

experiences of men and women in relation to masculinity and femininity" (Coleman 2012, 27).

Additionally, researchers are increasingly seeking to understand consumer coping in terms of resilience. Chakravarti (2006) notes that the field of consumer psychology had given less attention to resilience and welfare prior to special issues of the Journal of Macromarketing and the Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, but that the literature in these areas was beginning to grow. With the publication of these special issues, studies exploring consumer vulnerability became more prominent both in marketing and psychology. Indeed, the influential Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) definition of consumer vulnerability as discussed above was published in the Journal of Macromarketing special issue.

Consumer responses to vulnerability or stigma can be positive in creating a feeling of empowerment (Bingen, Sage and Sirieix, 2011). This empowerment can enable consumers to adapt market resources and counter stereotypes through their purchasing choices. Using insight from critical urban geography, Saatcioglu and Corus (2016) explore how consumers create ways to cope using space to empower. Space can be used to create marketplace exclusion through the careful design of brandscapes, using symbolic cues, objects and artefacts to indicate acceptability to certain groups of consumer, and inaccessibility to other groups. This can not only be true of physical but also digital spaces, reproducing the vulnerability of offline consumers who have limited or no access to the internet, or the skills to be able to

navigate usage for specific purposes like financial transactions or finding medical information.

Broderick et al (2011) describe several positive ways of coping, such as product innovation. For transgender consumers, this could be repurposing gendered products to better fit their needs (McKeage, Crosby & Rittenburg, 2017). Social resource, using others to help navigate an unfamiliar or new marketplace experience such as a disabled consumer shopping with a companion to increase access and choice when grocery shopping, is another positive way of coping with vulnerability (Elms and Tinson, 2012). In terms of cognitive strategies, magical thinking has been used by consumers to help shape their coping with cultural expectations in situations where they are potentially vulnerable (St. James, Handelman and Taylor, 2011). Magical thinking in this sense broadly allows consumers to externalise their control over a situation and "construct a space of ambiguity to sustain hope" (ibid, 646).

However, consumers also employ aggravating coping strategies, whereby the coping strategy can make the experience of vulnerability worse. This could take the form of avoidance or exit behaviour (leaving a retailer without giving feedback on what has caused the vulnerability experience), and hyper-consumption such as exaggerating a behaviour in an attempt to disrupt a stereotype (Broderick et al, 2011). For low-income consumers, high spending on household items and particularly clothing acts to relieve feelings of inferiority while simultaneously creating high stress through use of credit and requiring tight budget management (Hamilton, 2012).

Defining resilience as a "positive adaptation to adversity", Hutton (2016, 255) argues that traditional models of coping drawn from clinical psychology do not account for social factors, and reinforce gender and class bias due to their reliance on data from affluent, middle class people. These models also do not account for cultural factors affecting coping; culture is outwith the scope of Hutton's study, with its focus instead on exploring self-care practices and relational coping in economically vulnerable circumstances. The cultural aspect may be key in understanding different forms of coping – what is effective in one culture may not transfer to another. Saatcioglu and Corus (2014) note that in the case of poor women living in US trailer parks, entrepreneurial activities based in the home "do not turn into the communal micro-enterprises as in traditional subsistence contexts" (129). The authors speculate that this might be due to cultural differences, as trailer park residents prioritise their needs in different ways; some feel that their financial needs are paramount, whereas others focus on the social stigma associated with living in a trailer park.

Further, Baker argues that resilience is core to understanding vulnerability; excluding this confines analysis to a single dimension of vulnerability, such as a demographic (Baker, 2009). Resilience affects how consumers manage adverse consumption situations; resilient people are more likely to seek to address a disadvantageous experience with a provider (Ball and Lamberton, 2015). However, as Bhattacharyya and Belk (2017) point out, the assumption of empowered consumers obscures our understanding of the resilience of those in positions of marginalisation; the study the authors conducted sought better understanding of technology consumption among consumers in poverty. Interestingly, this work uncovered ways in which the dominant

class has power the choices of poor consumers, highlighting the resilience and consumer agency of the poor in relation to other "powerful persons" (ibid, 502). No matter the context, power remains central to our discussions of vulnerability.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the definitions of consumer vulnerability and stigma, and approaches which researchers have taken to understand these phenomena. The various ways in which vulnerability has been defined reflects the diversity of consumer identity. Although the literature seems to agree on the 'feeling of powerlessness' aspect of vulnerability experiences, there are differing thoughts on the level of consumer agency, activity and passivity in defining vulnerability. Further, the links and similarities between conceptualisations of vulnerability, stigma and symbolic violence are less well-explored. These concepts appear to have a degree of overlap despite different theoretical framings and emphases.

An interesting note in McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017) findings is that resolution for transgender consumers could create vulnerability for cisgender consumers. This overlap in experiences of vulnerability is not generally taken into consideration in much of the literature, as there is a tendency to focus on one dimension only. This could of course be due to time and resource constraints in conducting research in this area, but it does open up possibilities to explore consumer vulnerability using different approaches in order to more fully capture lived experiences.

Researchers must also look to the external influences on consumers which can impact experiences. The role of social policy and structural, systemic vulnerabilities is included in many studies of consumer vulnerability; factors which impact the state of vulnerability but are outside the control of individual consumers, such as location, educational attainment, poverty, disability, demographics which can carry stigma and negative connotations, for example. These (sometimes conflicting) identities and imbalanced power structures speak to broader inequalities in society, of which vulnerability represents a part of the consumer's experiences. However, this does not mean that vulnerable consumers are fixed within a system which withholds power, as studies on consumer responses note that there can be instances of empowerment in vulnerability experiences. Consumers can develop resilience and adapt when faced with adverse market conditions, and there also appears to be a cultural aspect to this type of vulnerability response.

The focus of this study is gender identity in consumer vulnerability experiences; much of the research exploring gender as a dimension of consumer vulnerability has focused on women; at the intersection of gender and low income, it is women who experience vulnerability, and this seems to perpetuate the "feminization of poverty" (Hamilton, 2009; Hill & Stephens, 1997). There has been very little attention to gender diverse consumers within consumer research; LGBT+ studies have tended to focus on white, middle class, gay men. This literature review will now turn to gender in consumer research, to look at different approaches to this topic by consumer researchers.

3. GENDER IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

3.1 Introduction

"Marketing has always been about consumption, gender has always been about differences. In the modern marketing era, up to the middle of the twentieth century, these two systems seemingly (and seamlessly?) worked in tandem to promote and encourage a consumption ethic in which men produced and women consumed. However, in the postmodern era, the ascendance of a culture of consumption has destroyed masculine-feminine differences by making everyone a consumer."

Kacen (2000, 345) seems to suggest here that gender differences no longer matter in the marketplace. While it can be questioned whether a genderless consumption ideal has in fact been reached, this quote does show how closely linked gender and marketing have been and continue to be. Understanding the construction, deconstruction and effects of gender is crucial for marketing, as it impacts representation in advertising, market segmentations, brand meanings and gatekeeping by marketers who decide what (and in what ways) to promote (Visconti, Maclaran and Bettany, 2018). Gender as a concept was introduced into sociological discourse in the 1970s, representing a political shift away from using 'sex' as an analytical category (Bettany et al., 2010); this switch from biologically or psychologically constructed understandings of characteristics to a socio-cultural understanding was later reflected in the marketing literature.

Interest in investigating gender through consumption has been growing in consumer research through a number of special issues in respected journals such as *Consumption Markets and Culture, Journal of Marketing Management,* and a forthcoming Gender(S) special issue in the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*. Edited collections and handbooks discussing gender and consumption have been published (Otnes and Zayer, 2012; Dobscha, 2019a), and the expansion of feminist perspectives is notable as books such as the *Routledge Companion to Marketing and Feminism* (2022) are published. Additionally, the biennial gender conferences run via *GENMAC* since 1991 give consumer researchers the opportunity to discuss and present their findings. Articles, books and conference papers such as these take a variety of approaches to studying gender, some of which are discussed later in this section.

Ubiquitous and often reduced to a simple male/female dichotomy (Arsel, Eräranta and Moisander, 2015), gender is a key part of consumer identity. Researchers interested in identity have been heavily focused on the self and individualistic perspectives through lived experiences. Belk's (1988) seminal article on consumers' constructions of identities through possessions established the core and extended selves, and according to Ruvio and Belk (2013), gender identity is "an internalized aspect of the self and is thought to be virtually immutable" (522). Immutability aside, gender is as central to consumers as innumerable other individualities; so deeply embedded in society is it, that its influence is often only briefly remarked upon, or is considered naturalised or taken for granted. Further, sexuality depends on gender for its foundations; the normative societal categories of heterosexual and homosexual require stable classification of the hetero/homosexual subject's gender and the gender of the

person(s) to whom they are attracted (Holleb, 2019). As such, much consumer research on gender also implicitly references sexuality through assumptions of heteronormativity, or explicitly through exploring LGBT+ consumers (bringing together gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identities under one umbrella).

This chapter explores how gender has been studied in marketing and consumer research previously and looks at innovative approaches which are beginning to be applied to knowledge generation in this area. The chapter begins by tracing a history of gender in consumer research, looking at how approaches to understanding gender and gendered consumption have changed and evolved. Following this, the chapter turns to feminism in marketing and the impact of feminist philosophies and practices have influenced consumer research. The next section explores queer perspectives, looking to Butler's (1993; 2004) work on gender performativity, before finally the chapter considers trans and queer theorising to highlight how these areas can help to shape our understanding of the diversity of gender and sexual identities.

3.2 Gender as predictive variable: 'sex roles' research

Gender studies in marketing have roots in social and cognitive psychology, where "consumers' gender is generally understood as biological, fixed or constructed as 'choice', reflecting the discipline's evolution from behaviourist perspectives" (Hearn and Hein 2015, 1640). This meant that initial interest in studying gender in the 1960s and 1970s was as a predictive variable in consumer behaviour; differences between men and women borrowed theory from psychology looking at decision making and information processing (Costa and Bamossy, 2012). Gender was examined through

separating personality traits into masculine and feminine, viewing gender as two-dimensional.

At this time, the terminology used to describe what researchers were attempting to measure was inconsistent. Despite again drawing from psychology, 'sex' refers to biological categories of male and female, gender or gender identity refers to psychological masculine and feminine personality traits, and gender roles refers to attitudes towards roles, rights and responsibilities of men and women; terms were often used interchangeably and distinctions between these three constructs were not always made clear in consumer research (Fischer and Arnold, 1994). This early research made use of two contradicting theories drawn from psychology in measuring these traits, the Bem Sex Role Inventory and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire, producing inconsistent findings due to the internal inconsistencies in the masculine/feminine scales used in both tools (Palan, 2001). In developing these scales, interpretation of masculine and feminine relied heavily upon the assessment of college students taking part, who judged personality traits as either stereotypically masculine or feminine. This internal inconsistency has meant that a criticism of the tools themselves is extended to consumer research utilising them; that because masculine and feminine are defined on additional dimensions to those used in each scale, and thus neither scale accurately nor fully captures gender identity (ibid).

Another widely investigated area of research, studies of advertising portrayals trace changing gender roles and stereotypes in advertising, beginning in the 1970s. The majority of studies have to date looked at European and North American contexts,

with Asian and African contexts receiving less attention. Researchers sought to examine the extent to which advertising portrayals of men and women were affected by cultural influences, and whether stereotypes reflected wider societal perceptions of gender roles; the advertising as 'mirror' versus 'mould' argument. This argument, which can be understood as a continuum depending on dominant social values and product types, as "advertising is a system of visual representation which creates meaning within the framework of culture" (Grau and Zotos, 2016), is often discussed in the literature, across contexts such as Japan (Ford et al., 1998) and Pakistan (Ali et al., 2012), and in reviewing or conducting meta-analysis of advertising research on gender roles (Eisend, 2010; Kumari and Shivani, 2012).

In many cases, scholars specifically examined the portrayals of women in advertising, comparing representations of women with those of men. Coding procedures include categories such as the age of the central figure, their profession, whether they are depicted as an active or passive user of the product, product type associations, and the location in which the figure(s) are depicted. Although there are points of disagreement on the extent of gender bias in advertising portrayals (Wolin, 2003), several studies find that men are more likely to be portrayed as an older, product authority, active figure, in independent roles and locations outside the home, not with domestic products (Knoll, Eisend and Steinhagen, 2011; Verhellen, Dens and de Pelsmacker, 2016).

Gender roles research also focused on non-traditional portrayals of women, and whether these were effective (Zawisza, 2019). As pointed out by Grau and Zotos (2016),

this focus on women has resulted in a lack of research about the changing role of men in advertising (noting the increased portrayals of men in softer roles, interacting with children). However, Gentry and Harrison (2010) argue that because advertising seems to reinforce traditional gender roles, it is contributing to masculine identity crises through conflicting messages about the cultural meaning of being a man: "hegemonic masculinity harms them [men[because it narrows their options, forces them into confined roles, dampens their emotions, inhibits their relationships with other men, precludes intimacy with children, limits their social consciousness, distorts their self-perception, and dooms them to living in fear of not living up to the masculine ideal." (Gentry and Harrison 2010, 75).

The concept of masculinity in cultural terms, as proposed by Hofstede in 1983, is one of the indices by which several studies seek to examine the link between culture and gender roles in advertising, often comparing countries with high vs low masculinity scores on the Hofstede scale (Odekerken-Schröder, De Wulf and Hofstee, 2002; Wiles, Wiles and Tjernlund, 1995). Further studies combine Hofstede's index with the UN's Gender Development Index (Paek, Nelson and Vilela, 2011), or both of these indices with another more recently developed framework (Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016). The latter authors find that differences between countries cannot solely be explained by analysis of these indices, and that culture appears to have a lesser effect on shaping advertising messages than previously thought. These studies look to cultural characteristics; in contrast, Sun et al (2010, 1615) state that "gender differences exist at three different levels: biological level, cognitive level, and behavioural and social level."

As this quote shows, consumer researchers continue to conceptualise gender as a binary construct (male or female).

Although authors like Peñaloza (1994) argued that biological differences are socially determined, it was the interpretive turn in marketing research in the 1980s and 1990s that brought more depth to investigating gender. Now, gender was also beginning to be understood as socio-culturally constructed, and therefore the meaning of gender was seen as socially and culturally affected. Researchers developed their methods for studying gender beyond quantitative studies and experiments, using ethnographic and qualitative methods to gain deeper insight into individual experiences of gender. However, the legacy of sex roles-based gender research can still be seen in how marketing practitioners use demographics to segment and target, which creates false differences and assumes homogeneity within a particular group (Dobscha and Knudsen, 2019).

3.3 Beyond 'sex roles': interpretive gender research

While the research discussed previously investigated gender in advertising portrayals from behavioural and social psychology perspectives, interpretive studies have also been conducted in this area. For example, Luyt (2011) takes a feminist social constructionist approach to analysing advertising portrayals; "femininity and masculinity do not exist as fact, waiting to be observed, described and explained. Rather they are considered social categories that are constantly (re)negotiated and variably understood" (366). This type of approach requires distinguishing between the

processes of representation and practice, as media representations inform gender practice and vice versa.

Schroeder and Borgerson (1998) also note the role that visual media plays in the construction of gender identity, as images do not simply "reflect or portray" (164). Advertising gives meaning to visual images, creating cultural form through what Kang (1997) calls "signifying practices". Advertising meanings become absorbed into society through what we read, view, our beliefs about how we live, and these meanings are constantly being re-created in our cultural context; "Advertising is a social practice, and it does not operate in a vacuum." (980).

The visual nature of advertising is noted to subjectively influence perceptions; "Advertising images are a central part of the experienced visual world. Reality and advertising do not constitute two separate spheres acting upon one another; advertising and the mass media contribute to the visual landscape that constructs reality." (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998, 161–162). Analysis of the meaning of advertising changed its focus from its impact on people, where the consumer is "passive and malleable", to viewing the consumer as an "active interpreter and constructor of meaning" (Elliott et al. 1995, 191).

Creating and recreating meanings through social practices is a theme which appears in several consumer research studies on gender. Looking at the ways in which an individual becomes gendered through social interactions, conventions and norms, and ideals of behaviour has helped consumer researchers to apply a gender lens to various

phenomena. Investigating attachment to objects as an expression of the self through a gender lens, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) found that "women emphasize social ties through their favourite objects. Men represent their accomplishment and mastery in favourite objects." (543). The authors noted that many favourite objects were gifts; gift giving is a topic which has also received the attentions of researchers interested in the gender dimensions of consumption. Fischer and Arnould (2002) investigated Christmas gift giving; gifts are symbolic of the relationship between giver and receiver, communal values and rituals such as gift shopping are more strongly associated with women, and women are more likely to express love through gift giving. This association of gift giving as 'women's work' also arises in Laroche et al's (2000) study of Christmas gift giving (focused on in-store information searching behaviour, the authors found that Christmas shopping is seen as the remit of women).

Similarly, in a study of memorable gift experiences, strong associations between femininity and gift giving and the role of women in this ritual were noted (Palan, Areni and Kiecker, 2001). The authors concluded that by focusing the attention of their participants on 'memorable' experiences, women may have thought of rarer instances of receiving rather than giving due to the feminine associations with gifts: "Men, having no prescribed obligations or roles as givers or receivers, chose to write about giving and receiving experiences almost equally." (106).

The socialisation of men and women to perform certain roles and to maintain identities within society has been seen to create tensions, between norms and ideals of masculinity and femininity, and lived reality. This balance of traditional and new

seems to affect women in particular; in a historical analysis of changing times and norms, Iranian culture has shifted over the past 50 or so years, between viewing the hijab as a discouraging symbol of backwardness, to a hijab representing the rejection of Westernisation of Iranian society (Yazdanparast et al., 2018). Conflict between cultural ideals and lived realities has appeared in research across different cultural contexts. The Iranian context mentioned here is a more recent example of this but looking at the baby boomer generation in an American context, similar tensions can be seen, this time in terms of the role of mother. Thompson (1996), using a hermeneutic methodology, explores conflict between expectations and ideals of femininity and the reality of everyday experiences, causing stress for participants who have internalised a sense of 'holding it together'. Children are women's responsibility, and the cultural satisfaction of motherhood is as the ultimate expression of femininity; representations of the self are highly gendered, reflected in everyday consumption choices though which women 'juggle' traditional and changing gender roles.

The construction of masculinity and masculine identity also reveals conflict and tension; in a changing socioeconomic environment, pressure is exerted on traditional male roles: "men who have suffered pangs of emasculation in this new environment have sought to symbolically reaffirm their status as real men through compensatory consumption" (Holt and Thompson 2004, 425). Compensatory consumption allows these men to feel liberated from anxieties such as personal autonomy and the expectation of "breadwinner masculinity" (426), which forms a historically idealised view of a real American man. However, Thompson and Holt (2004) go on to argue that compensatory consumption fails to fully capture the relationship between

consumption, consumer culture and men's masculine identity projects: "patriarchal identifications lead them to construct consumer pleasures in opposition to the ideal of rational, ascetic morality" (328). Men, the authors suggest, incorporate feminine elements into their consumption while simultaneously expressing disdain for the same, allowing them to visit and play in the world of femininity without threatening phallic ideals central to traditional male identity construction.

The expression of a hierarchy, in which the masculine is elevated above the feminine based on patriarchal power and dominance, aligns Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity with Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014). Along with the work of Judith Butler, Connell's work has also influenced consumer research in gender. Critiquing sex role theory as failing to integrate diversity in masculinities and femininities, hegemonic masculinity conceptualises the power relationships between genders as the dominance of men over women, a position which has itself been critiqued (Demetriou, 2001). In re-examining this conceptualisation however, an argument has been made for strengthening understanding of hegemonic masculinity by taking a holistic approach to gender hierarchies, "recognising the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848).

In questioning power relations between genders, dynamics of sexuality should also be considered; although challenged by feminist movements, gender role stereotyping and taken-for-granted heteronormative assumptions persist (Lai, Lim and Higgins, 2015). Ruvio and Belk (2018) discuss identity conflicts felt by trans people in terms of

strategies of self-extension, as they look to develop Belk's (1988, 2013) work on the extended self. Although not an explicitly feminist work, their analysis explores stereotyping and stigmatised identities, the role of possessions in symbolising different selves, and the ways in which non-normative behaviours challenge social norms.

The heteronormative structures which constrain and influence consumption itself also permeate consumer research in gender; "research on gender often stresses an implicit connection between gender and female sexuality, and between females in ads and sexual appeals. Clearly these categories overlap, but their consistent linkages in the research literature speak to stereotypical images of gender and sexuality" (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998, 174). This can be seen in the ways in which compulsory heteronormativity creates an 'othered' gendered experience of singleness, where heterosexuality is imposed through cultural expectations of opposite sex coupling and procreation as an obligation (Lai, Lim and Higgins, 2015).

Schilt and Westbrook (2009, 443) explain that "heterosexual expectations are embedded in social institutions". These authors also note the link in media journalism between violence and transgender identity, noting a gendered pattern of violence which speaks to a "combined threat to both gender and sexuality posed by transgender bodies" (ibid, 453). As Blyth and McRae (2018) note, trans people suffer different kinds of violence in society such as harassment, transphobic hate speech, physical assault and the enactment of discriminatory legislation. This covers different types of violence including symbolic through harassment and hate speech, and

structural violence in discriminating legislation. In consumption contexts, the illegitimacy produced by dominant systems is reflected in limited offerings, restricted access to products, and an absence of products which cater to the specific needs of particular groups (Velagaleti, 2017). These factors can create feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, which in turn negatively impact upon consumer wellbeing. Powerlessness, referred to in Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg's (2005) definition, in the case of symbolic violence can be derived from misrecognition, and the naturalised sense that to feel inferior in this way is the 'natural order of things'.

In other words, to deviate from heterosexual (and presumably by extension, cisgender) identity, to reject the primacy of marriage and family, represents failure and abjection. Single women represent a threat to marriage and family, as they are not subject to male control of their sexuality and do not submit to the established patriarchal order of society. There is no equivalent perception of single men as a danger in this way, exposing gendered double standards. However, the authors noted that while women's singleness is pathologized, men's singleness is both celebrated and delegitimised through the continuous privileging of heterosexual couples and families in the marketplace: "participants experience the marketplace as an exclusionary and discriminatory space" (Lai, Lim and Higgins 2015, 1570).

This does not mean that such structures are not subverted, as Thompson and Ustuner (2014) discovered when investigating how gender is expressed and performed in the 'theatre of consumption' that is roller derby. Here, the gendered body is the centre of a network of power relations, where "heteronormative discourses culturally and

institutionally inscribe bodies in networks of gender norms, social classifications, social expectations and taboos" (239). The reworking of gender practices to diverge from such norms and expectations in a specific consumption arena allows a consumer to navigate social pressures and conform in other areas of social life; a roller derby persona provides an anonymity to disrupt gender norms outside of the constraints of everyday life.

Conversely, when an identity is threatened by gender contamination, consumers seek out collective support for that identity and avoid social environments where that identity is undermined or challenged. This has been researched in terms of gender and branding; Avery (2012) studied how a masculine brand like Porsche attempting to attract female customers created resistance to new gendered brand meanings among existing male consumers, particularly as the Porsche online brand community represents a dominant white, middle class, heterosexual male perspective and identity.

Interpretive approaches, casting the individual as a victim or hero negotiating social gendered norms, disconnects consumers' agency, and doesn't examine those norms or structures. The consumer as a negotiator of gender norms implies choosing which norms to comply with and which to resist, reducing the (de)construction of their gender to a lifestyle choice, and this interpretation doesn't take account of political and social consequences or challenge power in gender processes and practices (Hearn and Hein, 2015). Gender is not always a choice which can be one selection or another at any given time, and is not always an option A or option B; "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and

enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair." (Butler 1990, 30). A view of gender as a consumerist choice speaks to the neoliberalist "market ethic [which] works to reconstitute subjectivities", where sensemaking comes through "discourses of freedom, responsibility, and choice – no matter how constrained" (Orgad and Gill 2022, 16). This can further reinforce a dualist, dichotomous, binary conceptualisation of gender, and such a view does not fully account for implicit power imbalances in everyday consumer life.

In the 1990s, feminist researchers sought to question gender binary power dynamics, arguing that inadequacies in mainstream philosophical dichotomies privilege one of a pair (e.g. male perspectives privileged over female) (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 2000). Interpretive feminist methodology allows other voices to be heard, those that had been thus far excluded in consumer research (Hogg, Bettany and Long, 2000).

3.3 Feminist theorising in marketing

Feminism and gender are intrinsically linked; one of the key aims of feminism is to address gender-based imbalances and inequalities, and much of feminist thinking about consumption has been focused on its negative impacts within marketing itself as well as other fields (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 2000). Feminism, particularly in the US, is typically conceptualised as waves which swell and recede, a metaphor which implies periods of inactivity, assumes a neatly linear progression and structure which does not really exist, and ignore the complexities in feminist discussions (Rome, O'Donohoe and Dunnett, 2019).

First wave feminism refers to campaigns for social change and women's equality through the suffragette movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Second wave feminism originates in the 1960s, with the sexual liberation movements, equal pay lobbying and a rejection of the oppression of traditional gender roles. The third wave of feminism is attributed to the calls to make feminism more inclusive in the 1990s, centring the voices and perspectives of women of colour and queer people, in response to the critique that feminism had thus far supported white, heteronormative hegemony (Evans and Chamberlain, 2015).

The feminism of the 1990s also challenged essentialist stereotypes of gender, which led to feminist critiques of marketing practice such as portrayals of men and women in advertising. With publication of feminist works in highly respected journals, there seemed to be something of a movement towards recognising contradiction in aligning marketing alongside the social change aims of feminism:

"Based on this [publication in leading journals], more structural, if not structuralist, feminist perspectives were introduced into marketing and consumer disciplines, resting on Marxist tenets that saw marketing, consumption and the advancement of women's interests as contradictory. In retrospect at least, they can be seen as representing a qualified movement towards a feminist standpoint epistemology" (Hearn and Hein 2015, 1631).

This recognition of the role of the market in wider society also led to a further focus on critical social issues which are impacted by gender; feminist consumer research

scholarship has looked at gender as "multiple, fluid, ambivalent and ambiguous, and markets became the discursive resource" (Hearn and Hein 2015, 1632). Despite a lack of articles with feminist perspectives appearing in journals between the late 1990s and 2010s, and a reluctance to admit feminist perspectives to the 'mainstream', consumer research is still influenced by feminist theories.

Part of the reason for a disjointedness of feminist perspectives in consumer research could be that there persists a misconception of what a feminist actually is. There are multiple feminisms and approaches, causing confusion; the table below shows some of the feminisms that have been used in consumer research.

Table 3: Types of feminism in consumer research

Type of feminism	Definition	Use in consumer research
Poststructuralist/Postmodern	"Postmodernism deconstructs such a representation that admits only a masculine vision... for women, the explicit purpose of writing the feminine body is to give substance and body, so to speak, to the insistent feminist	The feminist critiques of consumer research in the 1990s were poststructuralist, deconstructing the masculine ideology and orientation of marketing, to address its underlying androcentricity (Stern, 1992; Fischer and Arnold,

	voice that has been denied legitimacy. Postmodern feminists suggest that it is only through writing the feminine body that the hegemony of patriarchy embodied in language can be subverted." (Joy and Venkatesh 1994, 338)	1994). Rosalind Gill, professor in social and cultural analysis, has also written extensively on "postfeminism", more recently arguing "whether or not the subject interpellated by postfeminist discourse can be 'presumed heterosexual'" (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenburg 2020, 6).
Ecofeminism	"man's domination of women as merely reproductive bodies [connected] to that of humanity's domination of nature and the degradation of the environment" (Maclaran and Stevens 2019, 238)	Ecofeminist critique in marketing has argued for more emphasis on the emotional rather than the rational (Dobscha, 1993), challenging binary systems that are socially constructed to devalue women and the environment.

	"Application of ecofeminist theory to modern social problems relies heavily on an intersectional reading of gender and nature and the dismantling of patriarchal dualisms" (Dobscha and Prothero 2022, 94)	Ecofeminist approaches also call for marketing research to look beyond individual consumption, critically emphasising the role of patriarchal structures which contribute to the climate crisis (Dobscha and Prothero, 2022).
Liberal	The equality of men and women should be based in rationality; psychological differences between men and women are developed rather than innate due to social roles (Bristor and Fischer, 1993).	In a study of gift giving experiences, Palan, Areni and Kiecker (Palan, Areni and Kiecker, 2001) examined how men's behaviours do not always correspond to the traditional, assumed, male gender role. Stern, Tewari and Gould (Stern, Gould and Tewari, 1993) looked at sex-typing in service encounters,

		finding that services seem to be "either strongly masculine or feminine, or moderately a little of both", and how the service is perceived on the basis on typical other customers. Although feminism is not explicitly discussed in either article, both studies discuss the social nature of gendered roles.
Neoliberal	Rottenburg (2014, 420) argues that neoliberal feminism is grounded in an "imperialist logic", moving away from a social and collective justice focus towards an individualistic framing which forsakes critique of liberalist notions of	Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018) paper in *Feminism and Psychology* explores identity construction strategies used on social media by female athletes. Addressing part of a "growing emphasis on market solutions to the inequalities faced by

	universal equality and contributes to the commodification of identities.	women in various domains of social life" (ibid, 17), the authors critique the role of market discourses in gender inequalities in sport coverage.
Black	Black feminist discourse "recognizes how systems of power are configured around maintaining socially constructed categories of both race and gender" (Taylor, 2014)	Exploring the intersection of race and gender for vulnerable lower caste women in India through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj (2015) do not specifically undertake a Black feminist analysis but do examine the power dynamics and systems which contribute to consumer vulnerability in an Indian context.

		Sobande (2020) however does employ an explicitly Black feminist perspective to examine the racist and sexist dynamics of media through Black women's experiences in digital spaces.
Decolonial	"Decolonial feminist approaches argue that it is important to recognize the feminisms involved in any given context... to recognize the social, cultural, and historical traditions and experiences of women from non-dominant categories" (Ourahmoune and El Jurdi 2022, 259).	Decolonial feminism seeks to challenge the centricity of Western approaches, highlighting the ways that a lack of local understanding and knowledge can keep women from the Global South trapped in colonial discourses which deny their agency and views them as needing to be saved through Western intervention

		(Ourahmoune and El Jurdi, 2022).

The difference in types of feminism relates to how power is conceptualised in different ways (such as class and labour divisions, or social interactions and institutions). There are however key principles which are the same across different feminisms; men and women should be equal, patriarchy is the cause of inequality, and sex and gender are distinct, not interchangeable (Maclaran and Stevens, 2019).

In trying to gain an understanding of power dynamics in terms of the market, researchers have relied on theory drawn from other disciplines such as sociology; the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 2003) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) have featured prominently in marketing analyses of gender and power. These scholars have theorised power in different ways; Butler's writings on power and theorising of gender performativity are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Bourdieu considers power and domination through the lens of the symbolic, as discussed in Chapter 2. Both of these scholars have influenced the current study. The authors' works have themselves been extensively critiqued (see King, 2000; Sayer 2012). Namaste (2009) questions whether Butler's work encompasses the complexities of women's lives, and argues that there have been political consequences of the centrality of transsexual women in feminist theory over the past 20 years due to how influential Butler's writing has been.

Taking such critiques into consideration should not however mean that theories such as gender performativity do not add value to investigating gender in consumer research; the performativity of gender led to feminists' questioning of the gender binary and the instability of gender and sexuality. Indeed, Cheded and Liu's (2022) work on crossdressing and (un)becoming explores the liminal nature of gender identities, combining Butler's approach to gender performativity with Deleuze and Guattari's theorising of becoming. This study considers the "careful and deliberate choices" (Cheded and Liu 2022, 78) made by male-to-female crossdressers, highlighting the "constant negotiations and appropriations of gendered market objects and rituals" (ibid, 79). Also exploring gender as a socially constructed performance, Seregina's (2019) article reflects on the ways in which individuals undo gender through crossplay in LARP (live-action role-playing) contexts. Discussing how individuals become for conscious and reflexive of how gender is performed through this crossplay, the author also mentions the need for other performers to recognise and engage with the LARP character for the performance to be successful. Both works however, although providing rich insight into gender as performance, focus on crossing genders in a binary way (male-to-female, women performing a male LARP character).

Further questioning automatic acceptance of a gender binary seems to indicate a need for feminist perspectives; seeing a 'fourth wave' of feminism in popular culture, fuelled by the Internet and social media, there has been a parallel resurgence of feminist thinking in marketing and consumer research (Maclaran and Kravets, 2018). The recent publication of a Routledge edited volume on marketing and feminism includes a wealth of perspectives, contexts and theoretical framings which show this resurgence

in action; with chapters covering the body, gender representations and technologies, this provides an overview of current research. Although there is a section on diversity which looks at topics like aging, there is only one chapter which specifically looks at LGBTQ+ consumers. It is to such perspectives that this review now turns.

3.4 LGBT and 'queer' perspectives

Consumer researchers are also looking further than dominant heteronormative consumer cultures by exploring the experiences, perceptions and preferences of gay and lesbian consumers, particularly through the lens of consumer subcultures. Kates (2000, 497) states that: "subculture emerges as a form of resistance to reified social structures such as class, race, or gender wherein contradictions and objections to the dominant ideology are symbolically represented through material possessions". This suggests that mainstream heteronormative culture sets distinct roles and norms of gender, which is then perpetuated through advertising.

Recognising the assumed financial strength of the LGBT market (specifically the presumption of gay men's higher disposable income over that of lesbian consumers (Oakenfull, 2007)), marketers targeting LGBT consumers began to invest in advertising via gay media, while academic research started to examine how gay imagery in advertising affects consumer perceptions. Noting that the use of gay imagery could result in backlash towards firms from consumers unwilling to admit such content into the heterosexual mainstream, Oakenfull and Greenlee (2004, 1284) find that:

"Overall, heterosexual consumers appear to have a more positive attitude towards advertisements with lesbian imagery".

Earlier in their discussion, the authors point out that the gender of the gay depiction in the ad should be considered by the firm, with a view to creating different strategies depending on how such imagery may be received by heterosexual consumers. In a follow up to this article, the same authors propose that in order to target gay and lesbian consumers in mainstream media, without the risk of upsetting the heterosexual audience, implicit imagery and iconography which holds symbolic meaning for gays and lesbians can be used, as it will go undetected by mainstream consumers who cannot perceive the meaning of the content (Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005).

Further, the authors then contend that doing so presents a moral issue; developing content that is unavailable to certain consumers creates deliberate bias, which is balanced by a deontological view that, given the stigma faced by gays and lesbians from dominant culture, content specifically meeting only their needs can be valid (ibid). Potential moral issues aside, homosexual identity incorporates more than simply sexual preferences and behaviours, it intersects with gender in ways which impact perceptions of gay representations both male and female (the dichotomy which is typically used to conceptualise gender in advertising studies).

Masculinities and femininities, gender identity and the body, and queer perspectives in marketing are generally described in binary terms despite acceptance of fluidity in the concept of gender (Bettany et al., 2010). Often, gender consumer research is skewed towards white, middle-class women (Maclaran, 2015), and this unacknowledged bias is perpetuated through the stereotypes and gendered subjectivities produced and created by marketers (a criticism which has also been levelled at feminism itself). Qualitative studies of LGBT consumer behaviours have been focused mainly on white, middle class gay men – the challenge of obtaining an unbiased representative sample, required for quantitative analysis, links to the stigma associated with homosexuality and the need for the divulgence of intimate life details (Kates, 2000).

Despite efforts to include ethnic diversity and lesbian perspectives through in-situ interviewing, Kates and Belk (2001) note that their study of Pride festival meanings samples predominantly white gay men, while Oakenfull (2013, 83) notes that although lesbian consumers have a shared homosexual identity with gay men, their experiences are "profoundly female". The degree of congruity between gender identity and consumer behaviour has been investigated but with an assumed static nature:

"while prior research suggest that gender identity congruity between an individual consumer and product or brand will yield positive results in terms of consumer behaviour, the consumer's gender has tended to be viewed as fixed based on biological sex, that is, male consumers will be masculine and prefer a masculine brand or product,

while female consumer will seek congruity between their feminine self-concept and their

preferred brands and products." (Oakenfull 2012, 968)

Thus, despite acknowledging the intersections and interactions between and within

sexuality and gender, the marketplace shows a lack of understanding of these

consumers' diversity, who often behave in gender-bending ways while simultaneously

imposing hyper-typical standards which constrain their consumption practices (Kates,

2002; Oakenfull, 2012).

Due to marketplace structures (product design, retail store layout, advertising etc. can

all be heavily gendered towards binary male/female, man/woman distinctions),

transgender consumers must "navigate a marketplace that is unfriendly and places

them at a distinct disadvantage" (McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg 2017, 77). Drawing

on interviews with trans and gender diverse participants, the authors further examine

social gender norms in marketplace contexts and how these and other macro factors

affect the experiences of trans individuals. The significant power of marketing in

shaping normative gender is emphasised again as marketing actions "can have both

positive and negative ramifications for these individuals far beyond the marketplace."

(ibid, 86).

This is also reflected in Camminga and Lubinsky's (2022) paper exploring testosterone

use among trans men in South Africa. The authors, while investigating how these men

experience trans joy in their access to the vial (of testosterone), are also subject to

marketplace forces, such as shortages and long waiting times. In addition, it is noted

that access to gender-affirming care in South Africa, as in many other countries, is also subject to negative ramifications in terms of legal recognition and regulation. The authors explain the history of testosterone use and highlight the initial purpose of the synthetic hormone, assisting cisgender men with virile issues. Despite the evidence that there were also non-cisgender users as well, a lack of visibility for trans men and trans masculinity still persists, with trans women and trans feminine people having been the focus of many media and medical narratives. There is no mention of nonbinary identities at all.

Ultimately, LGBT consumers must be understood as being as heterogeneous as their cisgender, heterosexual, dominant mainstream culture counterparts. The challenge for researchers is to realise that LGBT+ is itself a somewhat problematic umbrella; bringing together multiple identities of sexuality and gender, LGBT+ is often viewed as a subculture, which further complicates and homogenises consumers labelled as such (Visconti, Maclaran and Bettany, 2018). Further, as Coffin et al. (2022) argue, the study of sexuality itself within marketing theory tends to be focused on consumers within certain social and spatial boundaries, solely in its relationship to gender. Studies of sexuality are often seen as part of a "delimited and de-legitimated academic community" (ibid, 278). The authors also suggest there is considerable significant risk of exoticising and minimising contributions from the Global South, as marketing theory based on thinking from the Global North neglects the neo-colonial shaping of sexuality (and, it could be argued, gender).

There has been limited acknowledgement of consumption and its role in creating queer identities, with transgender and gender non-conforming identities remaining particularly invisible. To date, very few studies in consumer research have centred the experiences of trans and gender diverse consumers. One study which has explored how these consumers experience vulnerability is by McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017), in which the authors seek to revisit Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg's (2005) established model of consumer vulnerability through the lens of transgender people's lives. In the 2017 research, the authors reconceptualise consumer vulnerability as an iterative, cyclical system in which antecedent forces, vulnerability trigger events and consumer responses are presented as impacting groups of consumers both singularly and as part of the system.

Another study which does address the role of consumption in gender identity and diversity is Ruvio and Belk's (2018) article. In this work, the authors seek to build on the notion of extended self by addressing identity conflicts which can occur especially for trans people, where there is both an internal and external aspect to gender conflict in the construction of the self. In their findings, they discuss strategies of self-extension and the ways in which this can help to minimise or can intensify identity conflicts. The authors argue that "possessions are not just artefacts of identity. They are also artefacts of the social norms that govern the production of identity" (ibid, 108). This quote helps to illustrate the key role of consumption in identity, especially for trans people who are experiencing tensions between different selves as they transition.

Interestingly, although participants of this study are identified as undergoing transition or transformation, there is little acknowledgement in the findings or discussion of different ways to transition; transformation stages are given from "just realised" to "full transition including surgery". The implication here seems to be that medical transition is the ultimate goal, where social transition and transition by other physical means is not differentiated as part of the trans experience. In a study of female-to-male trans consumers, Hyatt (2002) notes that transitioning by physical and/or social means is not given much consideration by consumer researchers: "sex and gender are cued by everyday appearances and behaviours, many of which involve consumption" (325).

With the increasing visibility of trans and non-conforming identities outside of academic research, there is an opportunity for consumer researchers to more deeply explore what Costa and Bamossy (2012) describe as "theoretical considerations pushed further to seek insight into the universals of gender" (424). However, as even the most cursory of examinations of queer perspectives shows, "universals of gender" seem unlikely to be found.

3.5 Gender Performativity: No one universal theory

Normative gender culture is challenged by trans and nonbinary individuals; heteronormativity is so deeply embedded in institutional and cultural practices that it goes unseen and unquestioned in daily life, but is disrupted by 'deviant' practices which subvert gender (Wight, 2011; Maclaran, 2017). The ways in which consumers express gender identity has been explored in marketing research through the work of

Judith Butler, whose theorising of gender performativity has become somewhat synonymous with the concept of gender fluidity.

Gender performativity is a useful lens which challenges the notion of a "fixed and stable gendered subject", proposing that "gender identity is constructed by performing (and repeating) specific acts within a culture" (Maclaran 2018, 228). For Butler (2004, 199) however, performativity is not limited to speech acts but also incorporates bodily acts; "the body gives rise to language... language carries bodily aims, and performs bodily deeds that are not always understood". The importance of the body is emphasised here as Butler does not theorise or assume a body is stable or fixed, but it is "constructed and contoured by discourse and the law" (Salih 2002, 58). Further, Butler (2015, 18; 20) notes that "sometimes it does seem as if the body is created ex nihilo from the resources of discourse... Although one might accept the proposition that the body is knowable only through language, that the body is given through language, it is never fully given in that way". That is, the body is not exclusively created through discourse. In Butler's later works on vulnerability, they theorise the political dimensions of the body and its complicated constructions: "the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible" (Butler 2021, 16). In this, Butler reaffirms that for them, performativity encompasses both being acted on and the conditions in which we are acted on, in which we are subjected to and reproduce gender norms.

The repetition of conventional gendered activities can be so commonplace as to be "treated as social facts" (Thompson and Ustuner 2014, 238), whereas resignifying practices, which contest and destabilize conventional gender norms can create backlash directed to those who challenge dominant cisheteronormativity. For example, Thompson and Ustuner (2014) analyse the ways in which naturalized femininity is challenged by women's roller derby participants, to highlight the juxtapositions and subversions of gendered boundaries in marketplace performances. In her paper discussing the cross-gender performances of LARP (live action role play) participants, Seregina (2019) explores how performing the 'other' can create reflexive awareness of gender performativity, its cultural complexities and power structures. The author argues that "through the performance, individuals gain a bodily, material, and emotional understanding", acknowledging that without the recognition of others, the character performance can change or fail (ibid, 463).

In employing performativity, researchers can investigate the (re)significations and practices of gender, brought into being through speech and embodied acts of consumption. As Visconti (2016) discusses in their conceptual article looking at consumer vulnerability, performativity can contextualise consumers' actions and strategies within broader settings of norms, power structures, space and time, and also enables researchers to reveal the mutual influence of identity and performativity itself. Butler's work does have its critics; Brickell (2003, 166) argues that "Butler appears reluctant to grant actors any capacity for enacting gender", and argues that the confusion produced by this apparent contradiction of gender as something one does without acknowledging 'one' as an agentic subject. This means that researchers must

adapt performativity to include subject performance when Butler's original discussion rebuffs this.

However, as Schep (2012, 871) points out, it is impossible to account for "all gender dynamics within a single theory". Butler's work on gender performativity offers a way to explore the potential for disruption, the now paradigmatic linkage of gender and trouble (Stryker, 2004); "It is precisely the idea that gender is done through human agency and social interaction that led authors to defend the possibilities of not only challenging the gender binaries and inequalities, but also of moving to a non-gendered social order, where gender can be dismantled and undone" (Marques 2019, 206). Such a non-gendered utopia, where social categories and norms are critically and constantly reworked, may at first seem unachievable, but consistent challenging and questioning is one of the key tenets of queer and transgender theorising, as the next section reveals.

3.6 Trans theorising and queer theory: destabilising categories

In the 1990s, transgender theorising in the humanities and social sciences sought to question the medical construction of trans identity, challenging its socio-biological focus (Hines and Sanger, 2010). Many transgender studies scholars are themselves trans; challenging exclusion from society, transgender scholars create an academic platform for political activism through which sociocultural assumptions of gendered identity are critically addressed. The implications of troubling social categories, resisting supposedly stable binaries, and questioning norms can create space for recognition of those who do not adhere or conform (Sanger, 2010). These attributes

can also be found in queer and feminist theory, where power structures are problematised and stability is redundant.

Queer theory also redeveloped to further challenge societal norms and inclusion/exclusion in society (Maclaran, 2015); recognising the instability of identity, queer theory represents not a single methodology or conceptualisation, but an assortment of thinking about the relationships between gender, sex and sexuality (Spargo, 1999). Hall (2017, 161) explains this further: "having a queer conception of identity means understanding one's identity as contingent and always revisable". This also aligns with Butler's (1993, 19) view of queer as "a site of collective contestation", noting that the term will be constantly reworked, revised and reclaimed to continue to be useful and functional in terms of the political work of identity.

What queer, trans and feminist theory have in common then, argues Enke (2012, 61), is that they "all pull hard on the seams of conventional sex/gender nomenclatures". The destabilization of taken-for-granted social categories, and the examination of power structures at play in the "creation, recreation and reinforcement of these categories, is central to how phenomena can be viewed through queer, feminist and trans lenses. As Pirani and Daskalopoulou (2022, 297) explain, a queer perspective "invites us to rethink and make space for 'different, incoherent', 'transgressive' 'unstable' and 'shifting'" identities. The authors propose their queer manifesto as an "imaginative extension of what is acceptable theoretical ground in this discipline" (ibid, 284). Queer theory itself has an indefinable quality, representing a wide-ranging body of work which shares a political legacy that "says what it challenges rather than what it asserts"

(ibid, 295). In looking to what queer theorising offers to marketing and consumer scholarship, the authors present five areas where queer theory can provide new perspectives. They argue for focusing less on heterosexual categorisation and more on the interrelationships and complexities of sexuality in consumption contexts, for employing a queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006b) to examine orientation more deeply, and for expanding our notion of failure beyond value-destroying dissatisfaction, questioning the negative connotations of failure and exploring its possibilities (Kjeldgaard et al., 2021). These avenues offer a "critical theorisation of market and consumption dynamics" so that "dominant hierarchies of knowledge can be overturned, followed by research questions that could lead to new research pathways" (Pirani and Daskalopoulou 2022, 302).

Transgender scholarship has embraced the core of queer theory, ways of thinking that Hausman (2001) describes as informed by queer theory's "attack on heteronormativity; its emphasis on performativity over essence, its insistent denaturalization of sexuality" (467). There are notes of caution sounded in the merging of queer and transgender; Chaudry (2019) reiterates Stryker's (2004) warning that if transgender is positioned as the 'ultimate queer', "a category of potentiality, expansiveness, and diversity" (Chaudry 2019, 47), the material realities of inequalities, oppression, prejudice, harassment, and poverty, that transgender people experience as a highly marginalised group in society.

The significance of consumption in popular culture (speaking from a Westernised, usually Anglo-American perspective) as context for the development of transgender theorising is also worth noting: "the vehement expansion of consumer culture in the

1980s… is an indispensable historical backdrop to this new theoretical field and continually emerging cultural phenomenon" (Hausman 2001, 486). Utilising insights provided through transgender theorising could help to highlight the specific intersecting forms of social marginalisation which impact transgender consumers themselves. In particular, investigating the ways in which consumer culture reinforces and/or subverts wider sociocultural structures, and how this reinforcement/subversion impacts on consumers, recognising the instability of consumer identities.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the development of gender research in consumer research and different approaches taken in studying this area. The roots of marketing and consume research as an academic discipline can be seen in its historical focus on gender as a predictive variable in consumer behaviour, borrowing insight from social psychology. Since the interpretive turn of the 1980s and 1990s, researchers began to explore the lived experiences of consumers in more individualised ways, investigating socio-cultural influences, structures of power and normativity, and constructions of masculinity and femininity in consumer identities.

As in other areas of consumer research, studies have borrowed, adapted and built on ideas from a range of disciplines such as sociology and gender studies. Applying concepts from feminist thinking has enabled further discussion of power imbalances and positionality within research and the marketplace, opening up avenues to investigate identities as inseparable in consumer experiences. This kind of

intersectional approach has not yet been fully embraced by consumer researchers, perhaps partly due to the complexity of addressing many conflicting, competing and shifting identities through consumption. Intersectionality, and feminist approaches to research more generally, provide useful analytical tools which, considering the range of feminisms available to draw on, add yet more complexity to conducting research on gender.

Despite this, there has been a resurgence of feminist marketing research and writing, bringing to the fore voices which have previously been unheard. LGBT+ and queer perspectives in consumption have been explored to some extent, yet there is still much work to be done in broadening this area beyond white, middle class gay men. As noted above, the increased visibility of gender diversity in wider society provides consumer researchers an opportunity to continue the work of feminist and queer research in breaking down binaries and categories, to explore a rich variety of non-normative consumer experiences which challenge universalist conceptions of gender in society.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to conduct this research. First, the philosophical and paradigmatic underpinnings of the study are discussed, elaborating further on the epistemological stance taken for this research. The key parts of this research design are the feminist, social constructionist epistemology, which looks to address power dynamics and symbolic meaning-making in the research process. Following a brief overview of the data collection, the specific methods used to explore the research questions are described; netnography and interviews are discussed, as well as the use of fieldnotes to provide a reflexive, autobiographical angle to the research. This is in keeping with the tradition of feminist research which this study follows, through awareness of researcher impact, power dynamics and inclusivity. These ideas are further developed through discussion of the approach to data analysis. Finally, methodological limitations and ethical considerations are considered.

The three objectives of this research are:

Objective 1: to understand how gender diverse consumers navigate marketplaces

Objective 2: to understand how sociocultural, institutional, and individual factors may shape experiences of marketplace stigma and vulnerability

Objective 3: to explore how gender diverse consumers respond to consumer vulnerability

4.2 Research design: philosophical underpinnings

Ontology refers to a set of assumptions about the nature of the world around us; "the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes and relations in every area of reality" (Smith, 2012, 47). The researcher's perception of reality, their ontological position, impacts the design of any research at a fundamental level; "how can we know and represent what we know about reality", notes Spiggle (1994). In social science, ontology is generally divided between positivist and interpretive perspectives, where the former seeks to understand an objective world which exists in an external reality and the latter views reality through a range of individual perspectives.

Epistemology refers to the ways in which we understand the creation and knowing of knowledge, i.e. ""how do I know the world?"" (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 245). For Crotty (1998), ontology and epistemology work in tandem, sitting alongside one another to inform the theoretical perspective of the research. Acknowledging the challenges in how these merge, Crotty (ibid, 10) goes on to argue that the world "becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it".

This then introduces the complicated nature of meaning-making; if individual beings are trying to make sense of the world and its meanings for them, then this must inevitably result in many different senses and meanings. Consumers make sense through their perceptions, ascribing meaning in ways which are often context-dependent, as described in a study of luxury brand meanings (Hudders, Pandalaere and Vyncke, 2013). This is of interest to the present research as gender can be

perceived in multiple ways in varying contexts - what seems straightforward and simple in a binary sense can be complicated and problematised when perception does not rely on binary genders.

This is a position more often associated with interpretive research. Through a positivist or objectivist perspective, "scientific knowledge is both accurate and certain" (Al-Ababneh 2020, 80). This perspective may create challenges in researching a concept such as gender with the eyes of those who fail to conform to social norms, as the lived experience of gender may be very different from the scientific categories used. As Crotty (1998, 28) notes: "the world addressed by positivist science is not the everyday world we experience." Here we may also fail to address the core power relations of scientific categorisation; who determines what the categories are? How do we determine who belongs in which category (i.e., what do all members of the category have in common?).

This was and remains a central problem for feminist philosophers; this study is inspired particularly by the works of Judith Butler (1990; 2004) and Sara Ahmed (2006b) in feminist philosophy. Throughout the debates of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the essentialist assumption that there are characteristics which all women could be said to have, binding them together as a group, was rejected as consistently flawed (Stone, 2004). So if there is no unifying element, how can we determine who fits the category and who doesn't? This question raises a further issue; if identity categories themselves are "always normative, and as such, exclusionary" (Butler 1993, 160), then they are never used without some form of attached ideology and politics (Mikkola,

2017). Thus, there are ethical implications not only in how we categorise, but also the categorisation itself.

The core argument here is that the creation of categories themselves have implications for power relations and how the world is viewed, experienced and felt, where the designation of seemingly arbitrary categories always creates some form of hierarchy. It is inherent in us as humans to attempt to categorise, to help us understand the world around us, but we sometimes fail to question the assumptions behind those categories. Rejecting an essentialist view however also does not mean refusing to acknowledge or address their ramifications, what Weis and Fine (2004, 18) explain as "resisting the mantra-like categories of social life - race, ethnicity, class, gender - as coherent, in the body, "real", consistent, or homogenous, we also take very seriously the notion that these categories become "real" inside institutional life, yielding dire political and economic consequences." Rejecting essentialism then, this interpretive study sought to gather different perspectives of the everyday as individuals making sense of the social nature of the world around them. The following section will explore interpretivist research in marketing, drawing specifically on the Consumer Culture Theory paradigm which seeks to be inclusive of a range of perspectives of the consumer world.

4.3 Interpretive Consumer Research: the Consumer Culture Theory paradigm

Although it could be argued that the roots of interpretive consumer research can be traced back to the motivation research of the 1930s (Tadajewski, 2006), it is the 'interpretive turn' of the 1980s which is given most credit for propagating a different way of studying consumers' behaviour. The shift of consumer studies from a scientific objectivism towards approaches more familiar to the humanities was (and remains) the subject of much debate. Researchers continue to investigate whether consumer behaviour can be understood as a "microcosm of reality… [of] one consumer's shopping experience" (Szmigin and Foxall 2000, 195).

From the 'interpretive turn', the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) paradigm has generated a considerable volume of research. Although a prominent paradigm in consumer research and marketing, CCT by no means has strict or tight boundaries, sustaining an "ever evolving matrix of rhetorical, theoretical, and methodological practices" (Thompson, Arnould and Giesler 2013, 152). However, its unifying characteristic is the centrality of culture, "a shared belief in the importance of consumption as the foundation in personal, social, economic and cultural life" (Fitchett, Patsiaouras and Davies 2014, 497).

CCT as an academic brand was first proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005), in their foundational article which has been both lauded and criticised for setting boundaries of the scope of interpretive consumer research to date. Arguing that other

names for this stream of consumer research (humanistic, interpretivist, postmodern, naturalistic) obfuscated and confused rather than clarified and united, the authors attempted to bring together different perspectives in consumer research representing a spectrum of realities. CCT assumes that there exist multiple, interconnected, and socially constructed realities within cultural boundaries which are experienced by individuals (Shankar and Goulding, 2001). CCT research is ontologically interpretive (Goles and Hirschheim, 2000).

The CCT paradigm grew out of a dissatisfaction with existing conceptualisations of consumption as a process of acquiring, using and disposing of a product or service. From marketing's early roots in simply helping organisations to sell more products, the discipline broadened to also looking at social and cultural implications of consumption. It is the cultural dimension which is prominent in CCT research, where culture is centred as "the very fabric of experience, meaning and action" (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 869). The relationship between culture and consumption is immeasurable as it is iterative and cannot be distilled into a singular cause and effect event.

And culture is itself a contested site; the term "culture wars" began appearing in UK media in the late 2000s, initially focused on the US and then later in 2016, the UK. Linked to policy issues such as gay marriage, reform of the Gender Recognition Act, the EU referendum and Brexit, and Britain's colonial legacies, the media coverage has been mostly associated with tensions between different groups in society (Duffy et al., 2021). Issues of race and religion continue to feature heavily in UK op-eds following

the Black Lives Matter movement's resurgence in 2020, and government initiatives aimed at deradicalisation which appear to focus almost exclusively on Islamic extremism, apparently ignoring the rise of the fundamentalist Christian far-right.

Trans people are but one visible group who have been centred as responsible for social tensions. The divisive rhetoric and moral panic around transgender identities has spilled into backlashes against brands such as Gillette, who featured a trans man learning to shave in a 2019 advert. As Hines (2020, 706) puts it, "cultural fascination with the lives of trans people has continued unabated". Culture (and its wars) are deeply embedded and contested in consumer meaning makings; the politics of everyday choices cannot be overlooked in consumers' lives.

If CCT makes an ontological assumption of realities as a social construction which are experienced individually, its epistemological stance is to understand how social reality is created. An ontology of "commonly understood meanings", whereby linguistic structures, routines and interactions have a degree of stability, is subjective (Cunliffe, 2011). Cunliffe (2011) further revises Burrell and Morgan's typology, introducing the idea of interrelationships between reality and "interactions between people in moments of time and space" (ibid, pp8). The updated typology asks researchers to include a degree of reflexivity, and a recognition of the impermanence of research, capturing only a partial portrait of a given situation.

CCT research has been investigating the social, symbolic, experiential and contextual aspects of consumption to try to understand heterogeneous realities, and how

individuals create meanings, across the consumption cycle. This shift from econometric and psychological approaches to consumer behaviour, which it is argued misses broader perspectives and contextual factors, was political as much as it was disciplinary (Askegaard and Scott, 2013). Interpretive consumer researchers were seeking to take into account power dynamics and relations, and structural and systemic influences on consumer behaviour, approaching marketing scholarship differently to institutionally established, more managerially focused research. In approaching scholarship differently, CCT research can be interpreted as a product of social and political changes rather than emerging as a response to these changes (Fitchett, Patsiaouras and Davies, 2014). As these authors note, one of the primary critiques of CCT is that it tends to an overly intense focus on consumer subjectivities, failing to accept a conceptualisation of consumers who are unfinished and precariously fluid in their existence (Bajde, 2013). This kind of understanding is incompatible with an objective ontology; the cultural meaning of a message cannot be determined as right or wrong without a value judgement of some kind. This is not to say that investigations of consumption using determinist principles is itself wrong, as this would also be a value judgement. Instead, the interpretation of CCT is just that; an interpretation. Meaning relies on interpretation, and through interpretation, meaning can be absorbed.

However, given the potential for CCT to examine almost any kind of context and phenomena, there is a need for more critical perspectives and questioning of the centrality of consumption as the main point of analysis (Fitchett, Patsiaouras and Davies, 2014). An ANT perspective may prove fruitful for exploring social fluidities

such as gender, and Bajde (2013, 230) argues that "ANT simultaneously refuses to accept that there is universal, unmediated knowledge derived from self-evident facts and that humans alone construct reality and knowledge". Additionally, the author points out ways in which ANT and CCT overlap while illustrating that the "ontological epistemology" (Badje 2013, 233) of ANT invites uncertainty by rejecting a splitting of the world into active consuming subjects and passive consumed objects. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it is proposed to forgo studying "the unfolding and the 'growth' of actors through their attempts to make other elements dependent upon them by bending space and time" (ibid, 238) and stick to less vexing ontological and epistemological grounds.

Critique of consumption itself and its ubiquitous presence in our lives is not the aim of this thesis, although a critical perspective of the role of consumption is attempted within the explorations of power and everyday distress in its findings in Chapters Five and Six. This work remains situated within CCT as its objectives deliberately centre marginalised consumers and the ways in which they navigate the social and cultural world around them. This reflects the author's own positionality, morality, and desire to produce work aligned with social justice goals. What this means in practice then, is a turn towards more reflexive accounts, circling back to critiquing the role of power, institutional structures, and systems, in cultural life. The question of who gets to interpret, define, and critique calls for a kind of reflexivity in research processes that are constructively proffered through feminist philosophies.

4.4 Feminist epistemology

It should first be acknowledged that "feminists have always creatively and eclectically used different and seemingly incompatible philosophies of knowledge" (Bettany 2006, 5). Unsurprising perhaps, given that feminist philosophers of science have had to navigate assumptions and erroneous conclusions drawn by others unfamiliar with the complexity of feminist epistemology, simply because of the 'feminist' label (Grasswick and Webb, 2002). Feminist epistemology seeks to better understand how "our interests affect our evidence" (Steup and Neta, 2020); in other words, feminist epistemology attempts to address how our own perspectives of reality and by extension, knowledge, influence our interpretations of our data and our research more broadly. This seems to complement Moisander, Valtonen and Hirsto's (2009, 332) assertion that "knowledge is conceived as perspectival, i.e., as something that takes different forms in different conceptual frameworks, language games and practices of cultural representation".

A feminist epistemology is beneficial for this research in examining consumer perspectives of vulnerability, and taking into account shifting power dynamics taking place in social interactions. Ashton and McKenna (2020, 33) advise that "the social oppression that socially disadvantaged groups experience can bring them epistemic benefits". The dominance of certain groups within society is also an important aspect of feminist epistemology, as epistemic injustices are a way in which marginalised voices are kept isolated in knowledge creation and their contributions minimised. Hutton and Cappellini (2022, 4) expand on the concept of epistemic injustice, noting that "credibility is a source of power". The authors explain testimonial injustice and

hermeneutical injustice, recognising where members of marginalised groups are viewed as less knowledgeable and less able to produce knowledge, as well as structural barriers which prevent marginalised groups from participating in knowledge creation in the first place. This links further to feminist research approaches through attempts to use "participatory tools" of research (ibid, 5), acknowledging our responsibility to "facilitate everyone's ability to participate in meaning-making and meaning-expressing practices" (ibid, 12). Feminist epistemologies critically question "the subject of knowledge" (Kidd, Medina and Polhaus 2017, 4); Cappellini and Hutton (2022) point out that in fact, plural subjects and knowers may be more appropriate, considering that researchers are seldom alone even when at the margins.

Specifically, this study takes a social constructionist approach. Feminist social constructionism takes inspiration from the work of African American feminists like Patricia Hill Collins, emphasising that our experiences are always contextual and fluid, not fixed (Wigginton and Lawrence, 2019). Situated knowledge reflects the particular perspectives of the knower, a key theme in feminist epistemology. This comes from a claim of reality where "signs get their meaning not from their reference to external things but from their relations to all other signs in the discourse" (Anderson, 2020). The term 'discourse', argue Wigginton and Lawrence (2019, 9), acknowledges "the performative role of language in the social construction of knowledge and experience". Bacchi (2005, 202) determines two uses of the term in feminist philosophy of science; the usage here takes discourse to be "institutionally supported and culturally influenced" understandings of an issue which inform analysis and arguments.

Language is a key component of how reality is socially created, and discourse relates to the ways in which language is shaped by dominant culture and institutions within a sociocultural context. Reality can be understood then through social factors of culture, language and institutions (for example, legal frameworks, healthcare, and education). The main interest of the epistemological approach in this study is that social factors cannot be separated from the discourse which create them, and discourse cannot be separated from social factors.

Using the qualitative research framework proposed by Morgan and Smircich (1980, 492), this study follows a "view of reality as a social construction" but also tries to "account for man as an actor in the realm of symbolic discourse".

Table 1
Network of Basic Assumptions Characterizing
The Subjective—Objective Debate within Social Science

	Subjectivist Approaches to Social Science					Objectivist Approaches to Social Science
Core Ontological Assumptions	reality as a projection of human imagination	reality as a social construction	reality as a realm of symbolic discourse	reality as a contextual field of information	reality as a concrete process	reality as a concrete structure
Assumptions About Human Nature	man as pure spirit, consciousness, being	man as a social constructor; the symbol creator	man as an actor; the symbol user	man as an information processor	man as an adaptor	man as a responder
Basic Epistemological Stance	to obtain phenomenological insight, revelation	to understand how social reality is created	to understand patterns of symbolic discourse	to map contexts	to study systems, process, change	to construct a positivist science
Some Favored Metaphors	transcendental	language game, accomplishment, text	theater, culture	cybernetic	organism	machine
Research Methods	exploration of pure subjectivity	hermeneutics	symbolic analysis	contextual analysis of Gestalten	historical analysis	lab experiments, surveys

Figure 3: Morgan and Smircich (1980) qualitative research framework

Note here the use of 'man' as an actor; the very language used often ignores the possibility of multiple viewpoints and centres the masculine and male associated. As Bettany (2006, 5) puts it, "research relevance" and in this case, the words used describe its nature, can "disenfranchise other without significant challenge". This failure to include others (notably women and not necessarily more diverse genders) was the focus of much early feminist critique of research philosophy (Crasnow, 2013).

The purpose of straddling these two subjectivist approaches to social science is to explore a range of individual perspectives while not losing sight of the wider sociocultural picture relating to power dynamics and symbolic discourse within marketplace contexts. The appreciation of multiple perspectives in a social constructionist epistemology lends itself well to interpretive research, where the centrality of culture and subjective experience allow for both emic and etic perspectives to be recognised (Pettigrew, 2000). The emic perspective refers to participant's own descriptions of their experiences, thinking, and values, whereas the etic represents the researcher's interpretation of this in relation to the phenomenon under study, using multiple emic sources (Woodside, 2010). The value of engaging with emic and etic perspectives is that, although the distinction between the two has gradually become more blurred, in tandem they provide an empathic understanding of cultural context and an important external point for the researcher's analysis (Whitaker, 2017). Thus, this study uses both emic and etic knowledges to explore consumer vulnerability, grounding the analysis in researcher interpretations of participants' own words and perspectives.

Central to a feminist social constructionist epistemology is the acceptance that "there are multiple perspectives of any given event, person or object and that which perspective is currently accepted as correct is more a matter of politics and power than of some attribute of the perspective itself" (Burr & Dick 2017, 63). Similarly, there is no one, single social constructionism, but a core set of assumptions which underlie such an approach. For this study, the most pertinent of these is the critical stance towards categories through which we as human beings understand the world and the questioning and challenging of these categories (such as 'man' and 'woman'): "seemingly natural categories may be inevitably bound up with gender, the normative prescriptions of masculinity and femininity in a culture, so that these two categories of personhood have been built upon them" (Burr 2015, 3).

Categories of identity are ways in which we come to understand a knowable subject, and these categories "do not necessarily refer to real divisions" (ibid). Here, there is an element of etic understanding in shared questioning and challenging such categories, where individuals may come to understand themselves in ways outside of their own experiences. If a knowable subject is sustained through social processes and practices, and concepts do not have an intrinsic meaning which is waiting to be labelled or described by language, then meaning can be said to lie in comparison; meanings exist in a concept's relationships to others. These meanings are culturally and historically specific, and so are affected by the cultural discourses available at a specific time. Ahmed (2006b, 13) says "the social depends in part on agreement about how we measure space and time, which is why social conflict can often be experienced as being "out of time" as well as "out of place with others." This sense of being "out of

place" can occur in cultural contexts which ascribe categories of identity, particularly

gender, which do not fit for every individual in that context. Western conceptions of

identity are especially notable for inflexibility; Indigenous philosophies of gender in

particular have historically included a wider perspective of identity than the Western

binary which was colonially imposed upon them. In line with the multiple ways of

being, and of being gendered, there is an impetus to embrace and acknowledge

multiple ways of knowing. Such epistemic shifts in our 'knowing' of gender are central

to a decolonisation of marketing knowledge, looking deeply into the racist logic of

capitalism (Eckhardt et al., 2022). Although not a specific focus for this thesis,

awareness of the colonial legacy of knowledge creation helps orient the researcher

with their broader sociocultural position and identity.

Understanding identity as an "implicitly social concept" (Burr 2015, 123), it can be said

that there are multiple aspects to identity which make up a person, each constructed

depending on socio-cultural discourses and norms, and can sometimes clash with each

other. It is argued that interpretations of social interactions are contextual and will be

influenced by power relations in the interaction itself. Interrogating power relations in

interactions takes much inspiration from the work of Bourdieu, for whom "the

question of why it is that many forms of domination persist with relatively few

challenges" is a primary concern (Chambers 2005, 327).

Throughout Bourdieu's work, he seeks to attend to how theory and method can work

mutually to deepen our understanding of social phenomena, creating a conceptual

framework which endeavours to address long-standing debates of structure/agency

and subjectivism/objectivism in social theory (Mottier 2002). Although the place of gender in his own work was largely unexplored, feminist scholars recognised potential in Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus to explore gender identity, for example how reflexive awareness may occur in questioning norms of femininity (Thorpe 2009).

Power relations are evident even in everyday conversation, as discursive forces extend beyond the immediate social event (Burr, 2015). These discursive forces influence the construction of identity in ways of which we are often unaware; gender and sexuality are experienced as a given, as these subject positions are inherited through sociocultural norms. The micro and macro linguistic social structures are central in power relations through language. Micro-structures are in place in everyday interaction, where meaning is understood through interactions between people, and macro structures relate to wider social practices, institutions and relations. Thus, gender is constructed through "repeated performances of discourse", through our language and social practices (Burr 2015, 128). Knowledge then is "constituted by language and experience as mediated by discourse" (Bristor and Fischer 1993, 519).

This is the basis of Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, which speaks of the "discursive and socially constructed nature of the gendered and sexualised subject" (Maclaran 2017, 228), where "gender identity is constructed by performing (and repeating) specific acts within a culture" (ibid). This repetition can be disrupted by marginalised identities, whose practices do not conform to cultural norms and whose identities are restricted by rigid, existing categories. Such disruption allows for

innovation, which in time, becomes habitualised into routines (Andrews, 2012), establishing new patterns of understanding identity.

Gender is one dimension of identity which can be expressed through consumption; the body itself can also be a site of gender expression, through gestures and movements as well as physical characteristics (although gender expression and identification through genital knowledge is not often immediately or freely readable). Consumer culture can contribute to both the reinforcement but also subversion of wider sociocultural structures and norms. Butler expands on norms and regulatory power in terms of gender in their later work, stating: "gender requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime... for gender to be a norm suggest that it is always and only tenuously embodied by any particular social actor" (Butler 2004, 41). Norms, Butler suggests, define those not only socially intelligible through their conformity but also those who are outside the norm; failing to be either normatively masculine or feminine still requires there to be some relation to the norm of masculine and feminine. Further, Butler calls for feminist critical theory to be at least partially grounded in the body, to help address questions of what the body can mean if everything is viewed as discourse (Butler, 1993). More recently, they have explored violence and public demonstrations, combining insights from their prior works on embodiment and performativity to better understand political expression and social justice movements (Butler and Berbec, 2017). Butler has proved to be a key figure in gender theorising, not without some debate; in 2021, The Guardian published an interview with the philosopher which retracted several paragraphs of discussion on trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) rhetoric. This decision was subsequently

pilloried on Twitter, where the original question and answers were widely shared. Nevertheless, the value and influence of Butler's work on gender studies and feminism are difficult to overstate.

Having discussed the philosophical approach of this research, the following sections elaborate the specific methods through which the study was carried out and explains the process for conducting analysis of the qualitative data produced.

4.5 Research design: methods and analysis

This study employed multiple methods and collection sites. The framing of the research question in this study had an impact on the possible approaches considered; exploring lived experiences does not lend itself to a binary view of the world, as consumers' lives contain huge variety influenced by any number of factors such as cultural background and ethnicity, class and social status, gender identity. In this study, interpretive approaches were most appropriate in order to capture the nuance in stories and experiences; human data interpreted by a human researcher, considering a myriad of perspectives.

4.5.1 Overview of data collection

Table 4: Overview of data collection

Method	Details	Data collected
Netnography	Social media and online news and blogs searched over a period of 6	156 pages of posts and screenshots from social

	months from November to May 2020

Twitter: #transgender, #trans, #nonbinary

Reddit: gender, transgender, trans, nonbinary tags and threads

Tumblr: gender, trans, transgender, nonbinary, nb, genderqueer tags

Search terms used for news and blogs: transgender, trans, gender | media Twitter, Tumblr and Reddit, rewritten as text

190 pages of blog posts and online news media articles |
| Interviews | In-depth interviews with 16 participants

2 email interviews | 20 interview note entries in thesis diary

15 hours, 45 mins of interview audio recordings |

		1, 197 pages of interview transcripts
Fieldnotes	Reflexive fieldnotes written throughout data collection process	32 entries, both handwritten in thesis diary and typed as quick notes in Nvivo
	Notes taken during readings of autobiographical and other books discussing personal experiences of gender non-conformity	10 pages in thesis diary, typed as quick notes in Nvivo

There are a number of different data collections methods which could have been used to explore the research questions. Stories as data have been used differently in marketing and consumer research depending on the underpinning epistemology and ontology of the research design; as this was an interpretive, exploratory study, the researcher sought to interpret the subjective perceptions of the informants, using thick description and quotations to contextualise findings (Hopkinson and Hogg, 2007). The methods chosen to do so were in-depth interviews and netnography. Combining in-depth interviews and netnography in this research enabled the researcher to gain understanding of online spaces and environments for marginalised consumers, as well as physical, real-world encounters which participants have experienced.

Through analysing the stories of trans and gender non-conforming consumers told in interviews, and online, a subjective understanding of the informants' views of vulnerability can be gained. Data from participants can also be supplemented by stories found in autobiographical accounts written by trans and gender non-conforming people in blogs and books, whereby published life experiences can give insight into consumption patterns, perceptions, emotions and relationships. The value of autobiography and other works in popular literature lies in providing new ways to look at the symbolic meanings in consumer lives (Turley and O'Donohoe, 2012).

Blending digitally mediated data with face-to-face interactions will allow the research to explore both the online and offline worlds of trans and gender non-conforming consumers, as this consumption context extends into the larger social world (Kozinets, 2010). In-depth interviews have been extensively used as a key qualitative method in consumer research, as researchers' epistemological understanding is "that consumers' lived experiences can primarily be understood through their expressed subjective narratives" (Arsel 2017, 939). The text-centric focus of much netnographic research (Lugosi and Quinton, 2018) is expanded here to include some imagery where appropriate in the data and interpretation, supported by researcher field notes describing imagery and the feelings created in viewing. The data collection process is described in more detail in the following sections.

4.5.2 Netnography

Awareness of gender fluidity has grown particularly in celebrity culture (Hines and Taylor, 2018); through the internet and online media, consumers now have access to

discuss, debate, identify and interpret gender in a multitude of ways. Online media outlets are more frequently publishing lists of trans and nonbinary celebrities, like Cosmopolitan, Buzzfeed, Seventeen, and OK Magazine[1].

Netnography is "ethnography in the social spaces of online environments" (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets 2013, 108), a term which emerged from a recognition of the increasing importance of the internet in consumer behaviour and perceptions, at a time when searching online for information and participating in online communities was relatively new to most consumers (Kozinets, 2002). Used in marketing and consumer research to explore sub-cultures of consumption, boycotting behaviours, brand meanings and online communities (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002, 2006; Lim and Lyu, 2012; Weijo, Hietanen and Mattila, 2014), netnography has enabled researchers to use data such social media posts, news media articles, blogs, and forum chats to explore a consumption context.

This research followed similar data collection strategies, seeking to capture netnographic data across a range of social media including Twitter, Reddit and Tumblr, as well as looking at news articles, blogs, and editorials. Twitter, Reddit and Tumblr are micro-blogging sites where users can share text, images, links and other content with others. On Tumblr, users can reblog content from others, posting it to their own blog, similar to Twitter's retweet function. Reddit operates slightly

[1]https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/love-sex/relationships/g39437356/non-binary-celebrities/

https://www.buzzfeed.com/angelicaamartinez/nonbinary-genderqueer-celebrities

https://okmagazine.com/p/gender-fluid-non-binary-celebs-sam-smith-demi-lovato-miley-cyrus-courtney-stodden/

differently, in that users join communities known as subreddits which are delineated by interest, e.g. world news, music, movies, etc. Users can comment on, like, and share each other's posts both within the individual platform and across platforms.

The netnography data collection took place over a period of several months, from November 2019 to May 2020. The study used a combination of sampling approaches. Convenience sampling was the primary strategy in capturing netnographic data. This not only allowed for the sampling to evolve as the understanding of the research questions developed, but accounted for hard-to-reach populations; researchers often have to work with samples that are available in cases of marginalised or vulnerable populations, combining approaches to reach gatekeepers and participant networks to improve access (Abrams, 2010).

Additionally, researchers select sites which provide the best opportunities to investigate a phenomenon, so that the researcher's judgment is used in driving data collection choices. In this way, based on the researcher's experiences of social media platforms, Reddit, Twitter and Tumblr were selected as sites for netnography. These sites have active, candid and geographically widespread online communities in the context of transgender consumers. These sites were also selected due to the textual nature of their content (in contrast to the more visual nature of platforms such as YouTube and Instagram), and the open accessibility of the platform (accounts can be left open for anyone on the platform to view or locked to only followers, so that only open posts were included in the data collection).

The data collection process involved multiple repeated searches; each day, key words such as 'trans', 'transgender', and 'nonbinary' were used to find posts about gender diverse experiences. Tags and hashtags were also used to complete searches on Tumblr and Twitter, and keywords were used to find subreddits (subject-based threads) on Reddit. On different days, a particular site was chosen to help capture a variety of different conversations and textual data. To collect news media and blog post data, similarly strategies involving keywords were employed via Google searches so relevant titles and abstracts could be explored further. Articles and blog posts in which lived experiences were not the main focus were sifted out, e.g. articles focused on policymaking or gender-based interpretations of UK law where the aim was to examine the technical or legal implications without reference to individual stories or lives. Articles or blog posts in which the main focus was opinion or debate of gender-based rights, editorials or commentary on advertising or media, or policy or law from the perspective of an individual's story were included in the data collection.

One of the key strengths of netnographic research is that it encompasses both live communication and archival data, capturing naturally occurring conversations that would not be available through traditional interview formats. The nature of such conversations could be in depth or simply transitory; interpretation of the conversation relies on the researcher's understanding of the difference in online interactions from face-to-face interactions. It is important to note here that for the most part, netnography data has been anonymised in order to help protect the identities of the posters. However, this has not always been possible or even desirable; for certain posts discussed within the findings, the original screenshot is retained

rather than the text reproduced in order to preserve appropriate contextual detail. This is due either to the anonymous nature of the platform (particularly Tumblr and Reddit), or the fact that the poster has used stock imagery readily available to anyone with an internet connection.

Social media platforms offer an amplifying effect of calls for interview participants, and several interviewees were also recruited in this way. A purposive, snowball sampling method was employed in order to reach further potential participants, with some of those interviewed sharing the call for participants with their friends and networks.

4.5.3 Interviews

Moisander, Valtonen and Hirsto (2009, 334) explain that the interview is "a particular form of social interaction and cultural practice", influenced by the both the wider sociocultural contexts and the discourses of the topic under discussion. This turns the interview itself into a form of performance through which both interviewer and interviewee are creating and enacting cultural meanings, constructing a particular and complex version of experiences. Interviewing has become synonymous with qualitative research and require a level of skill on the part of the researcher to establish rapport with informants so that conversation can flow more naturally. Fully unstructured interviews are difficult to conduct, so in-depth or semi-structured interviews are more often used, where the researcher has a protocol or list of topics and seeks to explore them with informants.

The interview protocol was developed after some limited analysis of the netnography data, to help inform the choice of topic and to explore elements of consumption which emerged from the online part of the study. As part of the interview protocol, recent advertising campaigns featuring some trans representation were included for discussion to begin or continue the conversation, specifically the Starbucks campaign with trans youth charity Mermaids, and the Gillette advert featuring a trans man learning how to shave with his father. These ads helped introduce the theme of representation into the interview discussion.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours, with two participants providing some additional information by email. Taking place via Zoom and Skype due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a reliable internet connection was required which could have potentially limited participation due to economic status and access (Lourenco and Tasimi, 2020; Sah, Singh and Sah, 2020). However, recruitment for the study was entirely online and thus only participants with access to the internet would have been able to indicate a desire to take part. Additionally, in some research it has been concluded that participants are more open, at ease and forthcoming during online or virtual interviews (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). Given the sometimes sensitive nature of discussing gender, creating a relaxed and comfortable environment for the interviewees was important, made more straightforward by the fact that they were talking from their own space at home.

During the opening part of the interview, participants were asked to describe the personal meaning of gender to gain insight into different perspectives of trans

identities. This involved the use of not only asking questions but also projective techniques, probing and storytelling in the interview. Storytelling in consumer research helps to deepen our understanding as people tend naturally to think in narrative forms rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically (Woodside, Sood and Miller, 2008). Probes were used to clarify and for credibility, for example asking a participant what was going on at that time (Roberts, 2020), for example asking a participant to elaborate on an experience ("could you tell me more about…?") or on their views and emotions ("how did that experience make you feel?"). A collaborative, conversational interview approach was taken to facilitate "joint exploration of research questions" (Vera-Gray, 2017), to help address power balances in the research relationship and to actively engage both interviewer and interviewee in creative dialogue (Moisander, Valtonen and Hirsto, 2009). This is a key tenet in feminist research approaches, where questions of power and inequality are considered within the research design itself (Gunaratnam and Hamilton, 2017).

The interview sample size of 16 participants allowed the exploration of different identities under the trans umbrella while retaining the benefits of rich qualitative insights such as closeness to the data and interpretation of non-verbal as well as verbal data collected (Crick, 2021). The table below shows details of interview participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant through an information sheet requiring to be returned to the researcher confirming consent to be interviewed.

Table 5: Interview participants

Participant	Gender identity	Pronouns	Age	Location
Alex	Agender	They/them	24	Scotland
Ali	Nonbinary	They/them	19	Scotland
Carrie	Trans woman	She/her	47	Scotland
Casey	Trans man	He/him	37	England
Cassia	Trans woman	She/her	41	Scotland
Charlotte	Nonbinary	None*	30	Germany
Debi	Trans woman	She/her	59	England
Emma	Trans woman	She/her	67	England
Georgie	Genderqueer	He/she/they	26	England
Lucas	Trans man/agender	He/him	19	USA
Mars	Demi boy/nonbinary	He/they	20	England
Paula	Nonbinary	They/them	70	Scotland
Rei	Trans masc/nonbinary	They/them	39	Denmark
River	Trans man	He/him	20	Mexico
Sal	Trans man	He/him	24	Scotland
Valentine	Nonbinary	They/them	21	Scotland

*Charlotte asked that no pronouns be used so Charlotte is referred to by name only.

In considering the power relations at work in the research process, and the potentially

sensitive nature of topics under discussion, participants were offered the use of a

pseudonym of their choosing or their real name in the research. Several chose for their real name to be used.

The varied ages of participants further strengthen the study in providing differing perspectives, countering the notion that gender diversity has no historical roots and is merely a Millennial phenomenon. Indeed, Indigenous cultures have long recognised genders outside of the Western binary, with unique and rich identities (McNabb, 2017). Specific efforts were made during participants recruitment to address multiple identities in the research; noticing a lack of trans man and trans masculine perspectives, social media recruitment was particularly positioned to encourage trans men and trans masc people to contact the researcher for potential participation.

4.5.4 Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are a tool used to capture non-verbal cues, expressions and tone of speech in addition to as much detail as possible about the event or circumstances of the observation. Contextualising fieldnotes by keeping track of participants' characteristics and the physical locations of the interactions is useful in analysis (Gobo and Molle, 2017), but is still a purely textual resource of interpretation. Visual images can help researchers triangulate with written fieldnotes. Using images alongside fieldnotes from netnography and interviews provided a more holistic view of consumption behaviour, extending the range and depth of insight available within a particular environment and at a specific time (Peñaloza and Cayla, 2007).

Using an A5 notebook as a thesis diary, I kept interview and reading notes, and fieldnotes, adding images and sketches of tables, diagrams etc., to help enrich my memories and thinking about the data. The fieldnotes were taken at different times throughout the data collection period; after each interview, I briefly wrote about what had seemed exceptional or stood out in my memory about that discussion, including the way the participants spoke as well as what they said. During the netnography, I wrote a little about the blogs, books and news articles I had read, making a note of the source of the post or article, and how this might affect its content and tone.

The use of reflexive fieldnotes gave me the opportunity to record my own impressions, creating an additional, autobiographical angle in the analysis. My reflexive account as a researcher helped to enhance understanding the context under study and represented a way to question the hidden power and objective ideology of scientific research so that richer accounts are produced (Bettany and Burton, 2006). This record of my own feelings, impressions and thoughts as I conducted the study also helped me to express some of my own vulnerabilities as a writer; Fetterman (2009, 576) points out, "note taking is the rawest form of writing".

A particular concern of conducting research with marginalised groups is the impact of the researcher. As Olesen (2008, 331) notes, "researcher reflexivity needs to be tempered with acute awareness as to the contributions of hidden or unrecognised elements in the researcher's background". In other words, there may be parts of the researcher's perspective or approach which may influence their position within the research, but these elements may not always be directly discernible. It is never the

intention to exacerbate experiences of vulnerability, and consumer researchers in this area work hard to try to ensure that this is not the case.

Given the nature of working with vulnerable people, it is fair to assume that the power resides with the researcher. However, Downey, Hamilton and Catterall (2007) argue this is not always the case as the research process involves shifting power throughout. Hearing stories from those suffering addiction or marginalised groups can be "upsetting and stressful" (736). These experiences are often downplayed in writing up the research, if acknowledged at all; partly this is due to researchers' desire to minimise negative feedback about validity, but also because experiencing vulnerability as a researcher may be seen as a weakness, an impression which could be carried over in reading the research. The researcher should aim to manage the relationship with respondents in a balanced way, neither emphasising nor glorifying their vulnerability.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, I kept reflexive fieldnotes from interviews and netnography in the form of a research diary. With entries completed on a semi-regular basis, this diary helped me explore the feelings and impressions which arose during the research process, enabling space for sensemaking and reflecting on wider issues of gender, inequality and vulnerability in my own experience. McDonald (2013) argues that queer reflexivity takes fuller account of shifting and fluid identities and power relations over the course of the research process.

The fieldnotes from this diary are used in support of data from netnography and interviews, providing an autobiographical take on the discussions and findings of the

study. This further allowed me to consider my own positionality, identities and power relationships, enriching and adding additional context to the findings.

As part of this reflexive approach to the study, I found that I myself began to question my gender identity. Many of the stories shared as part of the interviews resonated with my own experience, to the extent that I took some time to personally think through and explore their relationship with gender, in a similar way to several participants. At several points during the study, I also reflected on the ways in which my own values and perspectives may add to my interpretation of the data. This also speaks to the credibility of the present study, as my own gender journey helped to inform the inquiry.

Following the approach taken by Anderson (2020, section 7), I viewed this as a positive: "Value-neutrality ignores the many positive roles value judgements play in guiding the process and products of inquiry". This process of personal exploration enabled me to realise my own nonbinary identity.

This has a further effect on my positionality within the research; at the beginning of the PhD study, I identified as cisgender and was acutely aware of outsider status, and the impact of a cisgender perspective on researching trans lives. A queer reflexive approach to this feeling would have destabilised the categories of cis and trans right from the beginning of my research (McDonald, 2013), but it was only once I had begun a deep dive into the interpretation of the data that I took another, queerer look at my own fluid and shifting identity through the research. As Guyan (2022, 158) notes, researchers bring "a muddle of overlapping and intersecting identities to situations",

and may often be unaware of how these are perceived by participants. Following the realisation of my own nonbinary gender, I did become more of an insider to the trans community, with more than one participant noting that my nonbinary identity encouraged them to take part in the study. It was important for my participants that the person conducting the study was part of the trans community and could relate personally to trans experiences, as several of my participants explained unprompted during the interview process.

4.5.5 Analysis/Interpretation

Drawing on feminist and queer research methodologies, the interpretations adopted a "critical worldview of how gender and sexualities stabilise into binaries" (Pirani and Daskalopoulou 2022, 5). This perspective troubles the notion of sexualities and genders as belonging to individuals, and instead invites researchers to think about the role of power and discourse in shaping identity. Consideration of power relations and dynamics informed and shaped the interpretation of data so that these factors could be integrated into the analysis and discussed both in terms of individual and collective trans experiences.

Additionally, a further dimension of the analysis and interpretation followed a similar perspective to that explained by Moisander, Valtonen and Hirsto (2009), focusing on cultural practices and the ways in which meaning is (re)created by people navigating a marketplace. This perspective in the findings looks at the ways in which trans people make sense of the world around them and the consumption practices by which they create meanings through the lens of marginalised gender identities. In this way,

analysis recognises that "different discourses produce different social realities" (ibid, 338).

Netnography data was captured through screenshots (mindful of excluding the identifying information and account details in each post) as well as exporting as text of the transgender, nonbinary, and trans hashtags on Twitter on a single day (1st May 2020) during the data collection phase between November 2019 and May 2020. This data was then anonymised to remove user information and uploaded to Nvivo. The netnography data was iteratively coded first, to help inform the production of the interview protocol. This resulted in the creation of a coding tree, supplemented by the researcher's netnography field notes which looked to capture moments of interest that stood out during the readings of the data. These were then revisited throughout the coding to see how patterns and topics may have emerged and could potentially be grouped into broad emic themes.

The in-depth interviews were audio recorded and audio files and transcripts uploaded to Nvivo. Interview participants were given the option to have the interview not be recorded, and each interview was transcribed and throughout the analysis, both the textual transcriptions and audio recordings were used to contextualise interpretations of the data. Transcripts alone did not provide sufficient depth, and the researcher's fieldnotes also helped to supplement the analysis to create a holistic approach to interpretation. Data were iteratively coded through repeated listens and readings of interviews and reference to the netnography data and coding tree. A further coding tree was then created encapsulating the different forms of data under broad themes

which were revised and changed as the interpretation and applications of theory to data developed.

Throughout the writing of the findings chapter, the data and coding were revisited to continue the development of the interpretations. The coding was undertaken iteratively and the process of interpretation viewed as a reflexive one based on understanding the active role of the researcher in the process; these are not waiting to be uncovered or found, but are driven by the interpretations of the researcher (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009; Morgan and Nica, 2020). The final coding tree consisted of five broad themes, with two or three sub themes to further focus the interpretation, as shown below.

Consumer responses	Community
	Coping and resilience
'Distress'	Collective
	Individual
Representation	'Culture wars'
Structural factors	Symbolic violence
	Stigma
Transition journeys	COVID-19

Figure 4: Coding table

4.5.6 Validity and Reliability

Trustworthiness in research is universally important, regardless of the philosophical grounding and approach (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). These authors make several suggestions for addressing the trustworthiness of research, and this study employed a number of these strategies.

Firstly, triangulation of sources was used to build interpretations of data based on several participants' views and thoughts; coordinating between netnography and interview data, and reflexive field notes, helped to facilitate the credibility of the research. The autobiographical angle afforded by the reflexive field notes added a further, personal dimension to the data collection, as described in the previous section. Further, peer debriefings took place through regular conversations with the research supervisors. Although both supervisors are cisgender and heterosexual, their professional insights and requests for elaboration in more detail on the data helped me to reflect on the analysis I was undertaking. By requiring me to explain my thinking in greater depth, I was able to explore my interpretations of the data and bring in additional points and thoughts expressed during the collection. Iteratively working through the analysis meant I became more and more familiar with the data itself, and could draw on further examples from different participants to elaborate and strengthen my line of thinking.

Although every effort has been made to build as strong a study as possible and mitigate for potential methodological limitations, they remain in any piece of research. The following section will discuss these further.

4.6 Methodological limitations

The impact of research framing can affect the interpretation of research data; bias is inherent in any research because researchers are naturally inclined to particular paradigms or perspectives, and cultural factors also play a part in how research is framed (Baker and Gentry, 2007). Attempts to categorise consumers into fixed groups fails to recognise the heterogeneity of those who share a particular characteristic. Consumers do not create identity on a single dimension, there are multiple overlapping identities which people define themselves. This is where an intersectionality approach can be of enormous value; it must be noted that the complexity of this type of study requires time and resources which are not always available.

Although initially planned, a thorough analytical approach employing intersectionality became unfeasible due to time and resource constraints. The complexity of conducting such a study is illustrated in Choo and Ferree's (2010) methodological review article, in which the authors discuss process models and institutional perspectives of intersectionality, as well as intersectionality as a method of analysis. Authors including Kimberlé Crenshaw, the legal scholar credited with coining the term initially in 1989, have outlined how the future of intersectionality research will include "collaborative efforts across and within disciplines, sectors, and national contexts" (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013, 807), something which would be a difficult challenge for a PhD thesis.

Asking informants to talk about visual images, physical objects or materials can help researchers to look further than speech and written text (Peñaloza and Cayla, 2006). Taking this insight on board, during interviews for this study informants were to be invited to bring along objects which they feel help them express their gender identity, with the intention that this would help inform the interview conversation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the interviews had to be conducted virtually using tools such as Skype and Zoom, and the idea to use visual images and physical materials during the conversation became less tenable. This element of the interview process was dropped and interview practice was more strongly focused on building rapport through sharing the researcher's own experiences.

A particular limitation of netnography is that there is potential for a continuous creation of data. At a certain point it must be decided that data collection is complete in order to allow sufficient time for analysis; given the ubiquitous nature of metaphor in textual data and the seemingly endless stream of social media posts, it would be possible for a researcher to simply carry on collecting new data as it emerged almost indefinitely. Amassing sufficient data in order to conduct analysis, without falling into a constant cycle of only ever collecting data, would mean setting a time parameter; in studying the context of transgender consumers, the researcher restricts data collection to a specific time window. While trans issues are more prominent in society, and consultation and discussion of the Gender Reform Act (2004) are taking place, data is collected during the period of November 2019 to May 2020.

A further limitation of this study is that it has taken place over the course of a PhD process, restricting data collection to this time period due to the nature of completing a thesis in three or four years.

Finally, it should be noted that the interviewees were mostly White, educated individuals. Although intersecting identities were given deliberate consideration throughout the research process, the discussion of race in particular is limited due to the nature of the sample. This could partly be a reflection of the Anglo-European nature of the online audience whom the call for participants was able to reach via social media, as well as the capacity and resources for being interviewed available to trans people at the time of data collection. It is perhaps unsurprising that there is a lack of racial diversity in the sample, given the researcher's location in the UK and the need for English-speaking participants.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were embedded in each stage of the research project, considering the ethic of reciprocity or "Golden Rule, where the researcher considers how they would feel if the roles were reversed" (Sugiura 2016, 5). In this vein, I asked myself how I would feel about being a participant in this type of project, and allowed my own feelings to help shape the ways in which I conducted myself and the research. Additionally, I adopted feminist ethics of care throughout the life of the project. This also shaped my approach to research, highlighting not only interpersonal relations but also political and power dimensions of care (Keller and Kittay, 2017). I worked to give appropriate attention to the relationships in the project from different perspectives,

including my own internal view, the connections between the research and the community, and the wider relationships which exist externally in the broadest terms of academic research (Ackerly and True, 2008). With these issues consistently integrated into my thinking, I considered the vulnerabilities at the centre of this research alongside my own moral obligation of care towards others.

In this thesis work, I undertook the following to ensure I adopted ethical research practices throughout. Firstly, the study was approved through a systematic ethical review process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, with information about the research and some additional resources for help and assistance should it be needed in view of the kinds of topics discussed provided prior to arranging the interview. Both the interview protocol and the participant information sheet are included as appendices.

In addition, with the sensitivity of the research topic in mind, participants were asked if they would prefer to use a pseudonym or a real name in the research. The majority of participants were happy for their real name to be used, while a few requested a pseudonym. The choice of pseudonym was up to the individual participant, in order to redress power imbalances and recognise the participants' agency. Similarly, participants were asked for their pronouns and gender identity for the purposes of the research, with several choosing to provide more than one and more fully explain to me as the researcher how they identify. I also made conscious choices with the language I used, such as not asking for "preferred" pronouns, to avoid discomfort for participants

and to illustrate how, in this research, gender diversity is not viewed as a lifestyle choice.

Although a netnographic approach to data capturing may be unobtrusive, there is a question of the poster's presumption of privacy and thus an issue of consent in collecting netnographic data. Informed consent is preferable where sensitive topics are discussed, where the data collected could be traceable back to a specific individual, or where there may be potential for harm to a particular group (Kozinets, 2015). Securing informed consent in advance could also potentially bias responses, thus skewing data in a particular direction. Linked to this point would be gaining access to vulnerable groups online, an especially key consideration for trans communities who may have experienced trolling, doxxing and other forms of online harassment. Doxxing involves searching for and revealing personal or identifying information via the internet with malicious intent, illustrating ways in which opening one's identity to public consumption may invite both shared understanding and affirmation, but also negative actions from those who contest or disagree with non-binary genders. These communities may be wary and reluctant to take part in research. Similarly, given the often-pseudonymous nature of online interactions, it may not always be possible to determine the demographics of participants. Bearing this in mind, I have anonymised the netnographic data (social media data in particular) as much as possible (BSA, 2017).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodological approach taken in this research. The research was first situated in an interpretive ontology, and the complimentary CCT paradigm in consumer research outlined. The social constructionist epistemology driving the research was described and its feminist roots were considered. This included an in-depth discussion of the ways in which multiple perspectives can be integrated into a research process, and the importance of cultural and social contexts in conducting feminist analysis.

Taking into account power dynamics, the influence of the works of Butler and Bourdieu on the design of this study were considered. The methods used to gather data were then discussed, specifically netnography, interviews and fieldnotes. Describing how netnography was conducted and how this was used to inform the study design, the interview process was explored in more depth. Fieldnotes taken by the researcher and the reflexivity employed within the study were also explored, noting the contribution of the researcher's own gender journey to the ways in which the analysis and interpretation were undertaken.

This has added a further depth to the research findings and alongside this, strategies for sampling and participant recruitment were explored. In the analysis and interpretation section, validity and reliability in this qualitative study were also discussed. Finally, the ethical considerations and methodological limitations of the study have been examined, particularly in light of the sensitivity around discussing

identity and gender issues, and the impact of research framing in consumer research more broadly.

5. DISTRESS IN EVERYDAY GENDER PERFORMANCE

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, everyday experiences of marketplace distress are explored through a gender performativity lens. Separated into two main sections focusing on both the individual and systemic levels at which distress may occur, the first part of the chapter looks at the ways in which trans people navigate consumption and social interactions. This section introduces the notions of an authentic self and self-policing in trans lives, highlighting the ways in which distress can manifest in everyday performances of gender. Expressing a self that feels authentic can be of significance to trans people, but this idea is not without its contradictions. Further, trans people may (un)consciously monitor and adjust their behaviour or appearance in public spaces for safety, a practice termed here as 'self-policing'. The second part of the chapter looks more deeply at how systems, institutions and structures contribute to marketplace distress; the roles of media and norms in shaping the cultural environment in which consumption occurs are examined, drawing attention to the kinds of language used and representations of trans lives in mainstream media and marketing.

Distress in consumer contexts has been explored in terms of psychological distress and consumer responses to particularly financial circumstances, either situated with the individual's finances, or the distress of a failing financial environment around the consumer (Milanova 1999; Oksanen et al., 2018; Chamboko and Chamboko, 2020). Additionally, Malär et al. (2018) explored how branding strategies can affect consumers' ideal self and emotional states. More specifically to the LGBT community,

several studies have noted higher levels of distress, depression and anxiety (Scourfield, Roen and McDermott, 2008; Russell and Fish, 2016; Yarns et al., 2016; Mongelli et al., 2019) and increased risks of suicide and negative mental health outcomes in LGBT+ youth is widely influential in policy making (Bryan and Maycock, 2016). Howell and Maguire (2019) note that compared to their cisgender counterparts, transgender participants experienced higher levels of distress in particular related to healthcare.

In this study, the nature of emotion is interpreted as interpersonal and interactional, fluid and multidimensional. In addition to the social level, there are structural and institutional elements which shape the emotional experience of vulnerability; the powerlessness described by Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) could also relate to the seemingly uncompromising institutions of life like healthcare, government, and education. Here, distress is characterised by undercurrents of negative feelings such as sorrow, worry and anguish, which imbue marketplace interactions with sensations of unease and stress. This perspective aims to blend the embodied and the psychological, drawing on a notion of experiencing negative emotion as a state of "disequilibrium" (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Distress in everyday gender performance can manifest in different ways. For Butler (2009, iv.), gender performativity is inextricably connected to "who can be read or understood as a living being".

Findings in this study suggest that to be read and understood as human requires compliance with (binary) gender norms; those who fail to conform are more easily dehumanised, and this dehumanisation then creates distress for the individual in an environment which refuses to recognise their 'true' self. True (or authentic) self in this

context is understood to be an expression and discovery of the 'I' and 'me' that "operates unobstructed" in everyday life, one's "inner reality" (Havens, 1986; Leary, 2003). That is, a core understanding of who one is and the ability to act, think, speak, dress, do and be oneself throughout all aspects of one's life. Gender is a part of the authentic self in helping us interpret our relationship to the world and others around us (Butler's (1990) description of being legible as a human). Gender diversity then, is also a part of our interpretation of our reality. Hostility to gender diversity creates collective distress which can be felt at a cultural level.

The experiences of individual trans people are unmistakably varied; presenting as stereotypically male or female to avoid social, institutional, everyday conflicts may be distressing in different ways from the distress of being misread as binary male or female for a nonbinary person. This chapter is divided into two parts in order to explore distress in everyday gender performance for both the individual and at a cultural level.

5.2 Individual distress in the everyday

5.2.1 Social interaction

Trans consumers must navigate potentially hostile interactions with service providers, other consumers, and family and friends, who may or may not recognise and acknowledge their gender identity. The uncertainty of social interactions, not knowing if they will be faced with a lack of acceptance and acknowledgement of their gender identity, is itself a distressing experience. Lucas says:

"I come from a family that's very obsessed with societal presence and being perceived as proper and conforming and stuff like that... my girlfriend would say I'm a boot licker, but I am kind of a rule follower. My mother always hated it [gender nonconformity]. And she started getting worried around age 15 that I was going to be seen in men's underwear in university, and people were going to be disgusted by it... I'm very aware of the fact that the reason why I have issues with doing anything eccentric to my body is because of my parents. And I'm very aware of the fact that the reason why I identify as male instead of agender publicly is because my parents are okay with transgender people. As long as they're within the gender binary. It is that bias that is keeping me from feeling comfortable identifying that way."

Lucas faces tensions between how he sees his gender identity (or lack thereof) and how his family read his performance of gender. His family, feeling pressure to conform and be perceived as "proper" within the sociocultural structure of their lives, seek avoid being "linked to undesirable characteristics" (Link and Phelan 2001, 371) and excluded, in this case, Lucas' status as transgender. As Mirabito et al., (2016, 173) describe, "the family can serve as an especially painful source of stigma". In avoiding possible conflict with family members who do not understand and can't read him as agender, he performs a male, more masculine identity which fails to fully give consideration to his own sense of an authentic trans self - one who has no gender at all.

For Lucas, part of the stress in managing this own stigmatised trans identity comes from the courtesy stigma his family may feel in being associated with a trans person.

Sal also reflects on the power of performing a binary gender, describing how "people fixate on the gender binary." Sal sees this fixation as impossible to counter ("there's no point in denying this"), and remarks on noticing more sharply the extremes of 'manly' and 'girly' when transitioning. Although Sal talks more encouragingly about his family's acceptance and understanding of his gender journey, there is nonetheless an undercurrent of distress in his narrative, when he says "[transition, coming out as trans] was a difficult subject at the best of times." Although he has supportive friends and family, with one even purchasing his first binder for him, he still feels uncertain and is "keeping my guard up" regarding his transness.

The tensions created in presenting an authentic transgender self can make a trans person highly self-aware of how they navigate social interactions. Several interview participants explained gender as an internal feeling and sense of themselves; Emma uses the metaphor of putting on a jumper to keep warm in winter:

"You know, when it's cold you put a jumper on. You could either put a really thick Fair Isle sweater on. You got nothing on underneath. So it keeps you warm but it's a little bit itchy. That was my other gender. And being Emma is almost like I've got a really nice fine angora wool... really fits nicely, keeps me warm as well."

Emma's description of gender as well-fitting and warm indicates the importance of authentic expression (her "inner reality", Haven 1986, 375) - without being herself, she is left out in the cold. Drawing on West's (1996) comments that public life is drastically different for men and women, for trans people there is a further dimension

of distress to this, in the multiple contradictions of public life. For women, this can take the form of what West calls "street remarks" and the "infinite opportunities for the invasion of one's personal space" (357). For a trans person, presenting in non-conforming ways may draw attention and especially invasive questions or comments based solely on the perceptions of a cisgender majority public.

Carrie says that although she feels confident navigating social interactions in consumer environments like pubs and shops, she is aware of her 'otherness' as a trans woman: "the more effort you put into stereotypical feminine presentation, the less bullshit you're going to get." For Carrie, who has worked in consultancy, there is a definite contrast in how she has been treated prior to and following her transition. Presenting as a woman, she has found that she is talked over more frequently in meetings and her contribution is often overlooked. Although she laughs as she talks about this and says that she feels as though it is part of being a woman and she is glad to be accepted as such so readily, this seems to be a double-edged sword for her. She feels much less able to challenge dismissive behaviour as to do so is seen as 'aggressive' or 'bitchy' qualities in a woman; the paradox of trying to be both assertive and polite in the workplace (Pfafman and McEwan, 2014). The feeling created by this paradox could be something similar to the disorientation described by Ahmed (2006b, 159): "Disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis". The differences Carrie identifies in her experiences could be disorienting: she is treated as a woman and recognises the disparity in treatment of men and women in a workplace setting, aligning with the uneven distribution of which Ahmed speaks.

The disparities between social fields such as Carrie's professional and personal lives (where she is the lead singer of a metal band) create tensions which themselves may be a source of distress. Carrie describes feeling less able to be assertive in social contexts where there is an expectation of deference, aligning with Thompson and Üstüner's (2015) findings on the experiences of roller derby grrrls. In their study, these authors note how the social norms of life outside the roller rink create pressures which are felt much less strongly when taking part in derby activities. Stereotypes of feminine politeness and 'perfect' body image contrast sharply with the playful mixing of feminine and masculine afforded in roller derby, and these tensions can also be felt by trans women, as Carrie describes.

West (1996) discusses the contrasts in how men and women navigate social life, noting the asymmetrical relations between men and women in spoken interactions first discussed in Goffman's work. Carrie's experience seems to show this interactional asymmetry; the power dynamics of spoken interaction are less obvious but still very much present. The social rules of conducting conversation differ depending on the gender(s) of the participants, placing women, and perhaps by extension any person perceived as feminine, at a lesser status than men or masculine perceived persons. The robust link between gender presentation and consumption may also be seen in this Redditor's post asking for advice, noting that access to items to help them express their femininity was restricted due to COVID-19 lockdown protocols:

"Expressing femme without access to femme clothes?

I'm stuck at my boyfriend's place due to corona, and dysphoria is hitting hard. I want to feel/express more femme right now, but I have none of my femme clothes or accessories with me that usually help, and he doesn't own any makeup/femme stuff. Any ideas how to change gender expression? (Hate that femininity is so tied to consumption for me btw)."

The Redditor mentions hating the ties between femininity and consumption; this again seems to indicate ways in which femininity, though deeply desired as presentation for some trans people, could represent an internal tension for a trans person wishing to present as feminine for their own sense of wellbeing, but aware of the complicated and tangled threads of social norms, rules and expectations tied to being perceived as female.

This is not to say that masculinity is any less tied to consumption, but points to a particular relationship between femininity, social norms, and consumption related to appearance. The additional layers of complication added by social norms are reflected for masculine presentation too, but since the female and feminine has been historically more oppressed and devalued than the male and masculine (albeit a white, middle or upper class one), femininity sometimes may bring with it a unique and often unseen baggage. Regulating the ways in which femininity, masculinity, androgyny, or a lack of gender altogether, are expressed also brings its own type of emotional baggage, further complicating the relationships between consumption and gender.

5.2.2 'Self-policing'

When gender diverse individuals experience a level of distress particular to how they appear or present, they may take action to suppress, alter, or disguise an aspect of themselves. This may then mean that the individual unintentionally reinforces social norms through (un)consciously 'self-policing' by regulating their appearance and conduct. In doing so, there can be a shift of power; the trans person no longer has full autonomy in how they perform their gender as they are subject to the dominant power of social gender norms which dictate the acceptable ways to be gendered and therefore legible. This shift in power is also an aspect of Bourdieu's (1989, 2003) conception of symbolic violence; misrecognition of the shift further enhances the subtle dominance of cisheteronormativity. The performance of a facade, a binary gendered or stereotypical masculinity or femininity which may not fully fit their gender identity as they feel it, is a form of self-policing one's transness.

Self-policing in this way could be linked to an expectation of the negative perceptions, "both real and perceived" (Hamilton 2012, 82), of others and attempts to manage the emotional impact and feelings of shame associated with the stigma of trans and undertones of 'otherness'. The combination of pressure to simultaneously conform to and disrupt cisgender standards of stereotypical masculinity and femininity creates unique challenges for trans people. Conformity invites criticism of perpetuating gender stereotypes, or ridicule where conformity is deemed to be unsuccessful. Thus disruption may provoke harm, rejection and intolerance.

Emma talks about her ambivalence towards using makeup. Despite wanting to wear makeup in some circumstances in order to express her femininity, she feels uncomfortable doing so. She discusses the experiences of cisgender women, whose experimentation with makeup during teenage phases are broadly seen as a part of growing up:

"Most cis women who wear makeup, they learn in their early teens, mid-teens, they make the mistakes then... in my 50s, I don't want to do those experiments."

Emma feels that, having transitioned later in life, she has missed out on the opportunity to experiment in the same way. She is highly aware of how an older trans woman could be perceived as looking odd or 'trying too hard' to appear feminine. Although she is assured in her appearance and in 'passing' as a woman (being read as a binary individual by presenting either masculine or feminine to a standard apparently indistinguishable from cisgender people), she prefers not to stand out by wearing makeup as she feels unfamiliar and less confident with its use. Emma's reluctance towards makeup provides an interesting contrast to the findings of Jafari and Maclaran (2014), whose informants spoke of escaping into playful fantasy through their makeup routines. In their study, makeup was described as a way to entertain and indulge away from the dullness of the everyday; for Emma, it is a practice fraught with the potential for mistakes, rather than a canvas for creativity and expression.

This also contrasts with Cassia's expression of her femininity; growing up, she was interested in makeup and its creative potential. She pursued a qualification as a

163

makeup artist and has worked in theatre and on stage, where she talks about creating highly specific looks for plays and shows that sometimes required an exaggeration of feminine norms.

"I was a farm kid, so I didn't spend an awful lot [on clothes]... then I went to college and trained as a makeup artist, so I used to play with makeup all the time. The beauty industry is all about product... it was quite natural to me even at school, I'd experiment with looks and nobody was stopping me."

Emma touches on the differences between cis and trans women's expression of femininity, drawing attention to a contrast she has observed in the ways women dress with age in mind:

"It takes a while to arrive at your style and what you do. That's fine. But there is a learning curve...Where do most people get that style ideas from their closest female relative, their mother? I would say a lot of trans women seem to dress 20 years older than they actually are, their actual age because that's what their mother did. Whereas for cisgender women I think they dress about ten years younger than their age. Because they experiment. They go, yeah so what? Yes, I'm in my 40s, I'll wear a short skirt or something like that. So somebody in their 30s, that's a 30 year gap. 10 [years] one way for cis, 20 [years] the other way for trans."

Cassia and Emma's experiences speak to the normalising power of gender representations. Although they both express feeling secure in their femininity and

womanhood, they are constrained by an awareness of the ways in which they are 'other' when compared to cisgender women. Carrie talks about recognising a difference in interactions when presenting as stereotypically female, and Emma notes that she feels unable to 'make mistakes' with makeup due to her age when transitioning. Both women 'self-police' their conduct and appearance to fit more closely to the dominant expression of femininity. For Georgie, expressing femininity can itself be a cause of distress, so that they self-police the ways in which they dress in 'female clothing':

"I've definitely had these moments where I'm like, I will never be able to attain that because I'm never going to look like that, I've had moments where I was like, I'm not going to be that tall. My clothes are never going to sit on my body. I won't be able to present myself in a way that make me readable in the way that I want to be read. I've always kept my appearance quite androgynous... I have a problem with how a lot of feminine clothing, it can be beautiful. And I love the colours and patterns that women are allowed to wear in the way that men maybe aren't. But so often the clothing is designed to like accentuate the femininity of your body. It makes you feel vulnerable... that's what I'm uncomfortable with."

The particular form of vulnerability that Georgie expresses here seems to regard the body and its "invariably public dimension" (Butler 2004, 26). The body is always on display; "the fundamentally essential nature of having a body pervades everything" (Brace-Govan and Ferguson 2019, 63). Although they can disguise themselves and adapt their appearance, Georgie cannot escape the femininity of their body in clothing

for women. Thus, they experience a vulnerability that causes discomfort and gendered bodily dysphoria. Gender dysphoria (GD) is a term used in both academic and personal discussions of gender identities, and was adopted as a psychiatric diagnosis by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013.

According to Davy and Toze (2018, 168), it is often defined as "distress arising from incongruence between people's experienced gender identity and their "biological" gender". However, not all gender diverse people experience GD, and it has become something of a gatekeeper to gender-affirming healthcare; without a diagnosis of GD, many medical and surgical options for transitioning are unavailable. For Georgie, GD relates to their experience of their embodied agender identity, creating tensions with their assigned gender at birth and the perception of others of them as "female". They do not currently wish to explore surgical options to more closely align their body with their identity, noting that although they do sometimes suffer from GD, they feel discomfort with permanent alterations that surgery or hormone treatment would involve. They do express themselves further through drag, performing as a male persona and allowing them space to be masculine when they desire. Their femininity, despite being a source of vulnerability, can also be disguised or altered through their consumption choices in selecting more masculine or androgynous clothing, makeup, hairstyles, and the like.

This contrasts quite sharply with Debi's experience of her femininity: "I certainly love that feeling of feeling really happy, feminine." For Debi, femininity makes her happy whereas masculinity is a source of discomfort and distress - one that she must face

daily due to her living situation. Her wife refuses to accept Debi as a woman and Debi is forced to perform as male in the home. The poignant irony of her circumstances is that in order to avoid external distress within the family environment, Debi must accept the internal distress of a masculine role. She elaborates on this further:

"I feel that I rarely get the chance to express my gender fully now. I live, and present, as a man but feel that I am a woman. I have had the chance to express my femme side in the past and it made me feel affirmed, but not safe. Now I risk losing all the positive things I have gained from a lifetime of hard work and caring if I do express my true gender. I hide my femme side as much as I can, but since the physical changes that happened over the past year, I am finding it harder. With a waist that is smaller than my hips, and AA - A cup breasts, I could pass much easier than I could when I last presented as femme, and I have the urge to remove all my body hair and do just that. I have friends who call me Debi and treat me as a woman, but a wife who is virulently transphobic. My children have not been told, as she would go mad if I did, though I suspect they are less of an issue as they all seem to be less 'anti' than she is."

By self-policing her identity as a woman, Debi feels unable to express a vital part of herself. As her wife is "virulently transphobic" and refuses to recognise Debi's unhappiness, this creates a familial distress which is a basis for the difficulties in their relationship. The attitudes of a transphobic spouse can force a trans person to remain closeted for a long time; in Debi's case, to a point where she had to secretly seek help for her struggles.

Familial distress can be especially insidious; family as a heteronormative concept should be a safe space of support and affirmation, but when there is expression contrary to cisgender norms, some spouses will go so far as to describe themselves as "trans widows". This term emerged in media articles where wives of trans women discussed their spouses in transphobic terms which compared transition to death. It is interesting to note that such articles focus on the spouses of trans women, as though there is a particular 'grief' around a husband transitioning and expressing femininity. When Debi feels able to present as the woman she is, she describes her desire to be as feminine as possible, reinforcing her sense of her womanhood. Although an expression of stereotypical femininity may be extensively criticised as perpetuating the power of the gender binary, for Debi, female gender roles and social norms are an oasis and a source of peace.

The tensions between different interpretations of femininity within a transgender presentation or expression also extends to trans men and trans masculine people, where perception of male privilege and perpetuation of toxic masculinity (for example, avoiding anything deemed too feminine as weak or ineffectual) add a further potential dimension of distress. De Boise (2019) points out that acts and behaviour rather than individuals and identities are the problematic of toxic masculinity, and Pearson (2019, 1260) reiterates that masculinities are (re)produced through a "matrix of gendered relations". Both authors' work reminds us of the socially constructed gender binary; if something is not typically male and masculine, it is female and feminine.

Transgressing these strict borders of the masculine and feminine (singular, rather than recognised as plurals of masculinities and femininities as part of a spectrum of expression and identity) creates tensions of which trans people may often be acutely self-aware. River talks about being "very, very obsessive" when they were younger, constantly checking which brands of backpack and laptop case were perceived as feminine at school:

"I would check between men and women, what type of backpack brand they had. And then what type of laptop case they had, women had more colourful cases on them [than men], like dark blue. Kind of neutral colours. You know, for basically everything really... what types of brands are more to be misperceived. I would actively suppress things that I might've wanted to get in favour of getting those products [perceived as masculine]... very, very focused on the 'guy'... it's almost like a strong desire to prove myself as masculine or to be perceived as masculine."

In doing so, River could unintentionally strengthen the perception of certain brands or colours as more suitable for masculine persons. Ritch and Dodd (2021) note that even within a spectrum of masculine expression, heterogeneity is undesirable, thus River's preoccupation with fitting in to the circumscribed masculinity of their surroundings. They may also have been denying themselves any expression of femininity.

This points to another element of trans self-policing at play which may be difficult to overcome, the ingrained social habit of comparison to others - both the cisgender majority, and other trans and queer people. This is particularly poignant when Cassia

says that she still has "cringey reactions" to herself but also to other trans people and queer people. She experiences gender shock, a reminder that "overtly transgressive gender performances may be rejected as immoral" (Thompson and Ustuner 2015, 255). The perception of transness as 'other' is reflected in Cassia's feelings of discomfort with her own sense of self as well as awareness of her reaction to other trans and queer people.

Awareness of difference could have further negative impact on wellbeing; being self-aware adds an additional layer of reflection, as "the consumption of cultural activities is never truly unreflective" (Ourahmoune 2016, 262). Georgie mentions this when they discuss how people make shopping decisions to validate themselves, but muses that buying items specifically related to their transness marks them as having different needs; "It makes you acutely aware of how people always single you out for that thing". Having to seek out options and choices specific to their transness is another way in which they are marked as 'other'. Georgie is conscious that their consumption practices are in part influenced by the stigmatising perceptions of others in a cultural structure which sometimes creates what Link and Phelan (2014, 30) describe as "daily indignities". This Twitter user speaks of the daily indignity they face as a neurodivergent, pansexual, nonbinary person:

Sometimes I get tired of explaining to people. Explaining what #dyspraxia is. Explaining what #autism is. Explaining being #nonbinary & #pan. Some days I get tired of explaining who and what I am to others.

They describe constantly and exhaustingly having to discuss the non-normative parts of who they are; misunderstandings and preconceptions of others may be based on stereotypes of neurodivergence, gender identity, and sexuality. In explaining themselves, the Twitter user may also be seeking reassurance and validation of their identities, being sharply aware of how the mere fact of needing to explain could mark them as 'other'.

5.2.3 An authentic self – joy and distress

What an authentic self actually is or means has been a matter for philosophical debate; in psychology, an authentic self has been described as "owning one's personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences or beliefs... expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings" (Harter 2002, 382). The opposite of this, trying to anticipate and cater to the perceptions and preferences of others, is a cause of anxiety (Gino, Sezer and Huang, 2020) and distress. As Levitt and Ippolito (2014, 47) argue, "Although it may be easier to maintain discretion about gender identities, living a closeted life can exacerbate emotional distress". The notion of authenticity seems to be much contested but important to the experience of being trans, as being able to present, express and feel the "realness, the appropriation of the attributes of the real, is precisely the transsexual condition" (Halberstam 2000 , 65) . This Twitter user says:

I was born 47 yrs ago today and 4 yrs ago today I started #livingauthentic. Never thought I would be happy & love life. I stopped listening to lies of others and listened to

my truth. It is never too late to live authentic. #birthday #rebirthday #loveyourself

#trans #transgender

The Twitter user includes hashtag wordings like 'rebirthday' and 'living authentic' in describing how they feel now they are transitioning. They talk about 'living their truth' and being happy, noting the age component of an authentic identity ("It is never too late"). Georgie describes this as "queer joy", the sense of being seen by others as one sees oneself, feeling genuinely male, female or neither. Another Twitter user tells of their coming out as transgender in an almost story-like way, hinting at the catharsis and joy of finally feeling a sense of authenticity:

"On [redacted], I came out as transgender. To myself, and then to my wife.
That night I realized I would have to transition. That I would *get* to transition.
Then a teenage boything died.
A 40 yr old woman was released from a 25 year prison term. She cried.
She was me."

This quote highlights a possibility of emancipation through transition. The user describes being "released from a prison term", evoking feelings and connotations of captivity, involuntary confinement and restriction. Even the word "released" here gives a sense of newly found freedom and a wholesome surge of emotion; "*She cried*". Queer joy is incredibly powerful for this user, finally feeling liberated to be truly herself.

For Debi, online spaces such as Pinterest offer a haven of queer joy, where she is free to experiment and play with her feminine gender. She feels she is lucky to have found a safe online space for this, as reaching a point of confidence in performing an authentic transgender identity can be taxing. Emma likens her pre-transition life to a theatre performance, alluding to times when she may have still presented a certain way in the early days of her transition:

"I was thinking about it being a bit of an actor, who I used to pretend for many, many years. To be somebody I really wasn't. Can I pretend for a couple of hours to be somebody that I'm not really? Yeah, that's fine. Yeah, I could do that."

Here, following Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, Emma was performing an inauthentic self as though she were on stage, where she took on the role of a gender that is not her own and was judged by an audience on the extent to which she authentically played that part. Emma did not experience a detrimental effect from this, as she felt it was something temporary and it did not impact her sense of her authentically trans self; she knew she was a woman even when not performing a female gender.

What is especially notable about Emma is the potential tensions and contradictions in her gendered perspectives; on one hand, she was able to perform an inauthentic self without repercussions to her sense of wellbeing, where she felt like an actor on a stage. On another, she expresses feelings of doubt and apprehension when it comes to a stereotypically female practice such as wearing makeup. Although she knows she is a

woman and presents to herself and the world as such, she feels disconnected from something which is often seen as central to womanhood, where beauty is linked to self-worth. This contradicts McCabe et al.'s (2020, 657) description of women's makeup practices; "consumption of cosmetic products generates a sense of authenticating the self by connecting the search for external expressions to internal orientations". For Emma, her authentic self is not linked or related to the practice of wearing makeup, and she feels no less authentic as a woman even though she does not incorporate this into her performance of femininity.

However this does not mean that the notion of an authentic trans self is unproblematic. For gender fluid blogger Andrea Angus Grieve-Smith, authenticity is a double-edged blade:

"Transition is portrayed as not a change of gender, but as revealing the "real you," or your "authentic self." That implies that someone like me who chooses not to transition is hiding the real me or denying my authentic self."

Authenticity itself is a contentious notion; as Grieve-Smith points out, not all trans people choose to undergo some or any form of transition, be it social, physical or medical. An authentic self can be just as much about an internal sense of peace as a journey with a destination gender, an ongoing project of self, a state of liminality 'betwixt and between'. There are as many ways to describe trans experiences as there are trans experiences. In my fieldnotes, I discuss my own feelings about expressing an authentic self:

"I've been thinking a lot about my own gender identity. Reading others' experiences has me examining my own, and my own sense of my body and gender. I do feel a detachment from my body, like it has never fully reflected who I am. Looking back, I realised I was always mimicking and copying cool women around me to hide the fact that I didn't entirely fit into the category of 'woman'. I've been so used to fitting into boxes predefined by others that I never thought to question why I was so obsessed with fitting in and not standing out." (Fieldnote220520)

Although I am not undergoing any form of social or medical transition, I had a significant realisation in writing up my research diary which represented my own moment of queer joy. Later in this fieldnote, I mention my reluctance to use the label trans for myself at the time I was still exploring my gender identity and did not feel that trans was appropriate. Further, like Debi, I used Pinterest to visualise an aspirational queer aesthetic for myself. My internal sense of peace settled and increased immeasurably following this experience, even though my unease with specific trans labels endured.

The importance of an authentic self links to the intelligibility of personhood through recognisable performances of gender; when others cannot categorise someone's gender, that person may then begin to doubt their own perception of who they are, questioning their own authenticity (Garrison, 2018). This becomes particularly important in situations and circumstances where a trans person feels they must pass in order to be safe from harassment or violence. Referring again to the ways in which

trans people self-police as discussed in the previous section, Levitt and Ippolito (2014, 52) note that cisgender people are often "largely unaware" of trans experiences and so may not face tensions and conflicts in presenting an authentic self.

However, managing one's identity in social domains appears to cut across all gendered lines. It is particularly salient on social media, where a curated expression of the self is easily achieved through selection of image, filters, descriptions etc. Political writer and advocate Katelyn Burns writes of her own social media experience:

"I mainly used my Twitter account to follow soccer news. But around the middle of the decade, I first realized that I might need to transition and started following a handful of trans people. Seeing them discuss topics that I was interested in, alongside trans issues or their personal transitions, was how I eased into accepting my own trans identity. Eventually, I started my own anonymous trans account, which initially was meant to document the tragicomedy of being a closeted trans woman, but it quickly became a place to take baby steps into expressing my authentic identity without suddenly jumping into real world situations."

For Burns, following just a few trans people's accounts and starting her own account anonymously were the best ways to cope with the circumstances of exploring transitioning. She goes on to argue that seeing content created by other trans people, including before and after pictures of hormones and surgery, helped ease her anxiety, but does not mention how she herself presented on social media during that time. Although there are multiple psychological benefits to an authentic presentation online

(Bailey et al, 2020; Geary, March and Grieve, 2021), there are serious reasons for a trans person to maintain an inauthentic expression of themselves in digital spaces, such as concerns for their physical safety, the potential for abuse and harassment, identification of their trans status without their consent or knowledge to people near to them (work colleagues, friends, family) to whom they are not yet out. Remaining anonymous thus becomes a further avoidance coping strategy, managing the stigma of trans identity by presenting a cisnormative ideal online or in person. There are as many ways to describe trans experiences as there are trans experiences, both positive and negative.

"Ultra LGBTQ-focused series Sense8 was co-created by the Wachowski Sisters, so it's no surprise that the central character of Nomi feels like an authentic and positive portrayal of a transgender person. She's intelligent, attractive, successful, and she's able to form amazing relationships with those around her."

The above quote comes from a Buzzfeed article discussing trans characters on screen, comparing those who were "robbed" and those who were "done right". The word 'authenticity' appears a few times in the article in relation to characters portrayed in positive ways, although no definition or explanation of authenticity itself is offered. Rather, authenticity for trans characters in media seems to be understood as capturing the nuances of trans lives, where transness is part of, but not the whole, of a person. In portraying certain trans realities, the characters "done right" are seen by the audience as authentic. The characters who were "robbed" however represent stereotypes, tropes

and narratives which may be negative and harmful, thus their inauthenticity to the trans audience.

There is an interesting association with these characters being portrayed as deceptive or manipulative, a bromide which is in direct conflict to the notion of authenticity, as "to be authentic is to present oneself without guile" (Whitmer 2021, 146). Deception is something of which trans people have been accused in various contexts; the 'trans panic' defence is generally invoked by cisgender men accused of violence against transgender women. This is a disgraceful legal strategy in the US based on the transgender woman's supposed deception; the defendant claims that he was so shocked that he "panicked and lost control" upon finding out his potential or recent sexual partner is "biologically male" (Lee 2020, 1424). The impact of this type of criminal defence is that it reinforces stereotypes of trans people as cunning and dishonest, a notion which is echoed in the media representations discussed earlier. The trans woman's deception here is to present herself as authentically female, which in these cases leads to becoming a murder victim. As Billard (2019) observes, the perpetrators of violence against trans people are morally absolved as the blame for their actions is shifted to the deceptive transgender victim; the violence is justified as deserved punishment for transgressing their assigned gender at birth.

Such cases are the most severe examples of anti-trans violence and narratives of trans deception, but everyday instances of apparent trans deception may also be seen through the current culture wars, discussed in the later *Marketing and media* section

of this chapter. As this Tumblr user points out, perceptions of trans as inauthentic may stem from the simple act of presenting in typically feminine clothing:

"I've noticed that some people act like trans women in dresses (or skirts, or feminine clothing in general) are predatory "men in dresses". These people act like trans women think that only a dress makes them women.

The thing is, trans women usually wear feminine clothing to signal that they are feminine or female. They know that a dress doesn't make them female because they're already female. A piece of fabric doesn't change that.

Dresses don't make predators, and dresses don't mean your female because it's clothing. Let trans women wear their pretty dresses if they wish, because she'll be doing no harm."

The user appears frustrated at the view of trans women as "men in dresses" because they assert that a trans woman's authentic self is female anyway, regardless of clothing or presentation. The words "predators" and "predatory" evoke feelings of danger and peril, something disguised which represents a threat (to whom is unspecified, but given the discreditable stigma of being trans (Billard, 2019), the threat is likely to be to cisgender individuals).

Discourses of deception and authenticity serve to regulate the boundaries of identity enforced by dominant cisheteronormativity; as can be seen from the conflicts and tensions described in the quotes, social media, and blog posts of the trans people

above, authenticity is fractious and contested. For some, an authentic identity merely means being true to their trans selves. An inauthentic identity can be a source of pain and distress not only because it is not a genuine representation of who the trans person is, but also because it represents a perceived deception by those around them. The distress of performing an inauthentic identity, the distress of #livingauthentic, or the distress of being accused of deception may then appear to be omnipresent in trans people's lives. As Jones (2020) notes, "revealing one's core identity might disrupt" (254), but "the lived experience of authenticity was euphoric" (260).

5.2.4 Conclusion

This section has explored how trans individuals experience distress in everyday interactions with family, in the workplace, and other public spaces. Tensions are created for trans people when they are expected to navigate social norms which attempt to suppress gender disruption and exert pressure to maintain heteronormative expressions of masculinity and femininity. The idea of an authentic self seems to be both important and divisive. Where for some trans people, living authentically is central to their transition and a key part of how they navigate social gender norms, for others, it represents tensions in what it means to be trans. Authenticity seems often to be knotted up with medical and surgical interventions to remake the body in ways which conform to dominant cisheteronormative forms. However not all trans people want to pursue this kind of transition, and as Aultman (2019, 8) points out, undergoing gender-affirming surgery "does not guarantee that forms of social reciprocity will be there". This also speaks to narratives of transness as deception, disguising their 'true' gender in direct contradiction to living authentically.

Several participants discussed the "daily indignities" they face to express an authentic gender identity in a cisheternormative society. Lucas and Sal commented on the challenges of living with family members who fail to understand gender as a spectrum rather than a binary, noting that they perform gender in ways which are more congruent with this understanding than their own perceptions of their gender identity. For Carrie, Debi, Georgie and Emma, expressing femininity holds very different implications; Carrie and Emma remark on their desire to avoid stereotypes and the stigma associated with getting it wrong in terms of presenting as a woman. Debi feels a strong connection with her femininity which she is rarely able to express at home due to her living circumstances, but despite struggling deeply with presenting as male, she continues to do so to create some peace in her home life.

In contrast, Georgie finds femininity highly uncomfortable and prefers a more androgynous presentation; they feel a sense of discord between how they internally view themselves and their body in the ways they are gendered. They also still struggle with their family's views on gender, such that they also feel unable to fully be themselves when interacting with parents or siblings. In each of their stories, there is an element of trans self-policing, where they regulate their conduct, appearance and/or behaviour in social interactions in order to more closely meet cisheternormative expectations and norms.

Trans people often have to adapt to a level of internal distress to avoid putting themselves in difficult situations with those around them. Cassia's "cringey reactions"

to other trans and queer people speaks to the ways in which gender norms are deeply internalised. In an Advocate interview, author Jennifer Finney Boylan talks about a "faint aroma of apology" that she detects in her memoir, saying: "I felt like I had to be apologetic. I felt like I had to say, 'I'm so sorry, but this is who I am.'" The interview argues that now, 20 years after the publication of Boylan's influential book, there is less need for trans people to apologise for their existence and the space which they occupy in society.

Media narratives surrounding trans lives, discussed in more depth later, also work to shape acceptance of transness. Trans experiences are poorly understood as dominant narratives of LGBTQ+ lives centre on gay and lesbian people (Brown, 2018). Othering of transness, even within the heterogeneity of trans lived experiences, then intensifies social comparisons and the distress of being 'other' within a community of 'other'. The following section will explore the community aspect of vulnerability, looking at the systemic and structural factors which intersect to create collective distress.

5.3 Systemic and structural: the experience of collective distress

5.3.1 Institutions, norms, and misrecognition

Debi mentions receiving counselling and therapy to help with harmful feelings from suppressing her true feminine self, but is also self-aware of how much this affects her life and relationships. In respect to receiving support through counselling, she considers herself fortunate. Waiting lists for access to trans-related healthcare are "eye-wateringly" long, with patients waiting at least two years to be seen by gender identity clinics following a GP referral (Faye 2021, 85). The process of navigating NHS

gender clinics and services in the UK can be arduous. Casey talks about his feelings regarding medical transition:

"I think there's a lot of there's a lot of reliance on the trans person. To be very self-sufficient and very mentally strong to go through these processes via the NHS. It very much depends on your own circumstances... your own finances, your mental health, and confidence in dealing with this sort of thing and being able to go in and like you say, be firm with them and say, no, I don't want you to do it that way, I want you to do what I've asked you to do. It shouldn't be that I sit here and worry about teenagers crying themselves to sleep because some doctor told them they weren't trans enough yet to be allowed to exist. It's very, very upsetting."

Determining the borders of trans identity has historically been in the hands of cisgender medical professionals, particularly in the strongly patriarchal field of psychiatry. Legal requirements of a gender change on passports, driving licenses etc. in the UK currently include a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria and a documented period of two years living as their acquired gender, the process of gaining legal recognition of one's gender is inflexible, intrusive, and undignified (Zanghellini, 2020). Much of the power lies in the hands of medical professionals such as GPs (as the first point of contact for referral to gender identity services) who are often ill-prepared or ill-informed about the needs of trans patients (Vincent, 2018). Cassia experienced this too, when a letter from a gender clinic landed at her family home and was addressed with initials and surname; her father assumed it was for either himself or her brother, and Cassia had to explain in some detail the medical processes she was

undergoing. Fortunately for Cassia, her family are supportive and were positive about her surgical ambitions as part of her transition. However, she has also had to manage not only her own expectations but those of trans friends. As she opted for minimally invasive procedures to help her express her femininity, one or two of her trans friends who sought further surgical interventions were worried that she hadn't "gone far enough" and was focused more on the social aspect of her transition, rather than seeking to achieve a female bodily ideal which for Cassia, was not the purpose of speaking to doctors and surgeons.

Casey's concern for others feeling that they are not "trans enough" to receive gender-related healthcare, support and counselling is not unfounded; Garrison (2018, 613) notes that "many transgender people express anxiety about whether their experience of gender can be distilled into a narrative that is intelligible to others and appears consistent over time." Georgie reveals some of the tensions felt by transgender people in presenting themselves in legible ways in a cisheternormative cultural context:

"We hold gender variant people to a different standard. It's an unfair standard, they're expected to perform either femininity or masculinity or pure androgyny in this perfect way that can't be questioned. That means that we feel this huge pressure to adapt ourselves to align with those kinds of expectations. I have a lot discomfort with those kind of elements of fashion... with kind of queer aesthetic presentation that it's become you know, like it's inaccessible for particular classes. And I think that is dangerous. I hate the idea of a young queer person looking at that and being like, I'm never going to be able to look like that. So therefore, I'm not queer. My voice doesn't matter."

Georgie refers to the 'unfair' standard to which trans people are held; if one does not conform to social gender norms, there is an underlying expectation of how one's gender nonconformity will be expressed in socially acceptable ways. Further, the "queer aesthetic presentation" that Georgie mentions alludes to class issues and divides; a level of aesthetic and appearance requiring investment in expensive, often luxury brand, fashion pieces becomes inaccessible to a queer population living in poverty. Despite this apparent expectation, there is never open comment on what is appropriately gender non-conforming and what is not. Instead there are the unwritten and unspoken rules of cultural norms; gender non-conformity which can be read and is intelligible. Hay (2019) writes that "TERFs (trans exclusionary radical feminists) also sometimes complain that the performances of femininity enacted by trans women are chiefly retrograde stereotypes, caricatures of a femininity designed primarily for the pleasure of men."

The accusation that trans performances of femininity (noting here how trans masculine people and trans men are virtually ignored) perpetuate stereotypes belies the individual distress of being forced to present in certain ways, of self-policing one's gender presentation, or even presenting in closer alignment to assigned gender at birth than truly desired, to be gendered correctly. Emma and Mars allude to the tensions in gender expression when describing their feelings towards makeup; Mars likes to play with expressing masculinity and femininity through their use of makeup, whereas Emma feels as though there is a 'perfect' standard of feminine expression which she cannot achieve, so she does not use makeup much at all.

Gender as a binary construct between male/female, masculine/feminine is so ingrained that very little effort is required to maintain dominance of the social hierarchy (Schubert, 2008). The social norms of gender (re)created by advertising and media often either do not feature trans bodies, or only show certain bodies. Eris Young describes this in their book They/Them/Their, specifically noting that representations of nonbinary people present an image that's "thin, rich, beautiful, white, and able-bodied". Even when an alternative gender expression is acknowledged as possible, there is "huge pressure" to conform to a performance of androgyny that is acceptable to a cisgender majority.

Transition itself is often portrayed as a journey with a definite destination, something which fails to represent those for whom transition is an ongoing project rather than a distinct repositioning from one gender to another (Taylor et al., 2019). This resonates with Appau, Ozanne and Klein's (2020, 168) description of permanent liminality, a state where a "transitional period does not end". Representation of trans bodies is framed in media through a cisgender lens. Much of what the media shows of trans embodiment is negative, with transgressing gender norms linked to violent criminal behaviours (Lafrance et al., 2018). Valentine says of transness in media such as films and TV:

"It gets reduced to that one sort of narrative that's easily digestible for cis gender people. It's not really talked about in the best way. And, obviously, I think things are getting better. Stuff like those coming out with such a huge trans cast and that kind of thing.

And I think that's really good. But in a way, I feel like if someone's like transphobic or whatever, they're not going to watch that. I like that there's stuff that's made for us. But also I think the representations in general, media needs to be better because... I guess for the most part, trans people are either some kind of comedy trope or it's, you know, this person is disgusting. And that's the punchline. I've had this conversation with my parents a lot because, they're really big on the League of Gentlemen. And they're... [They] don't understand how it's transphobic."

For Valentine, there is an obvious transphobic angle to the content that their parents watch or consume, but this is invisible to their parents themselves as they cannot see media without a cisgender lens. The notion of a trans person as a punchline, often where their trans identity is violently revealed without their consent, is dehumanising and makes trans bodies the object of ridicule based on visible physical attributes. One Tumblr user notes that changes to the ways in which the site categorises visual content and images of nudity, sex and pornography has meant that trans users' photos of their bodies during transition, showing top surgery scars and hormonal changes to body hair for example, are now categorised by algorithms as inappropriate and removed. Tumblr is aiming to remove all pornographic content from its site and the user laments this change as preventing access to images of trans bodies like their own. Queer, and particularly trans, bodies are negatively associated with pornography and "the closet comes to be refashioned" (Engelberg and Needham 2019, 350).

In effect, the normalisation of trans bodies is stifled by algorithmic decision making, and queer stories and histories which were collectively archived in digital spaces are

oppressed. Personalisation of services, information, news, experiences, prices, and so on have become inexhaustibly embedded in everyday life, but we seldom consider how the algorithms which operate behind the scenes can constrain and generalise our ways of being (Lury and Day 2019). Indeed, although aimed at providing us with more individualised options and choices in life, automated decision-making and algorithms can also work to hegemonise and support dominant norms and values.

Oppression to trans normalities occurs invisibly through the very structures of communication. Baldino (2015, 162) notes there is a "certain type of oppression" in that trans people are only able to represent themselves using cisgender standards and language. Language as a restricting factor in expressing gender diversity is something that Rei notices in their native Danish:

"In Danish we only have one word. We have one word that encompasses gender and sex. So you have to explain what kind of a gender or sex we're talking about at the moment. And that in itself is a limitation because that means that you make the language more complicated. Yeah, you always need to have an explanation... in Danish, you have to have a long explanation to go together with it."

For Rei, describing themselves in their native language forces them to explain in detail the ways in which they experience their gender, as there exists no individual word in Danish which encompasses a nonbinary expression. Part of performing identity is the ability to describe one's experiences. Misuse or lack of awareness of language, for example using inappropriate pronouns, can be a significant element in creating

distress for trans people. Misgendering refers to an active choice to use incorrect pronouns or a deadname, which can be seen as symbolic violence in failing to recognise a trans person's humanity (Jones 2020). Ali has experienced this at home, where the value of using the correct pronouns for them is overlooked and their family misunderstand how and why misgendering can be hurtful. Ali doesn't believe there is anything malicious in their father's refusal to use the correct pronouns, but that "I think he doesn't think it's important to get my pronouns right… I think he views non-binary things as like a choice, whether you respect it or not."

Here, Ali has to accept that their father may not respect their non-binary identity. Their father does not understand the importance of this identity to their child and fails to see misgendering them as causing distress. Disrespect towards transness by family can represent what Steinfield et al. (2019, 410) refer to as an injustice of recognition, failing to acknowledge the humanity of "the other". Link and Phelan (2001, 370) consider the othering, when "social labels connote a separation of "us" from "them"", as a key part of conceptualising stigma. In the authors' later paper (Link and Phelan 2014, 25), they discuss the power imbalances between stigmatisers and stigmatised, noting how "misrecognition serves the interests of the powerful". In family situations, the power often lies with those around the trans person rather than the trans person themselves, as illustrated in Ali's experience with their father's misrecognition of their non-binary identity. As Kozinets and Liu (2022, 2) note; "family members may employ shaming strategies such as devaluing remarks… to discipline the stigmatised".

5.3.2 Marketing and media

Marketing and media have significant power in (re)creating and supporting the dominant social norms of gender; how to act, how to dress, how to present and conduct oneself socially with others in acceptable ways are reinforced by representations of social interactions in advertising and media such as TV shows, movies, and music videos. Representations, both positive and negative, help shape the perceived morality of different identities, and in the case of transgender people, also shape moral judgements about those identities. Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) explore this further in the context of marginalised consumer identities, noting the ways in which consumption can become a moral battleground. Strongly emotional social comparisons shape and are shaped by consumption practices; if one can see oneself in marketing and media in a positive light, social comparisons can be more positive and position or status in a social hierarchy can be maintained and negotiated.

For trans people, much of the representation, where it exists in media, is less than sympathetic. Carrie speaks of this when she thinks of her childhood and how she noticed how transness was treated in media: "there were no trans people in mainstream media other than comedians… occasionally a documentary [would show] a really miserable post-op transsexual in a miserable relationship with a miserable wife, going into a miserable shop to buy a miserable-looking dress!" Carrie laughs as she says this, but she also expresses how this representation felt off-putting and caused her to delay considering her transition; she didn't want to be miserable! As Hamilton (2012, 83) explains, "perceptions of stigmatisation not only lead to emotional effects but incite particular consumption practices"; in this instance, avoiding the apparent misery related to consuming as trans woman. Ultimately though, Carrie felt

that despite the memories of negative portrayals of trans lives, she would benefit greatly from pursuing her own transition goals.

A number of interviewees mentioned the Netflix documentary 'Disclosure', which involves several trans people discussing the history and background of trans representation in media such as film and TV. The documentary is notable as the focus is fully on trans perspectives and there are very few, if any, cisgender voices featured. Prominent trans creatives and actors such as Laverne Cox, Susan Stryker, Chaz Bono and Alexandra Billings guide the audience through the history of trans portrayals in (mostly American) cinema, scrutinising the impacts of damaging and flawed depictions of trans people's lives. Similar to Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) at-home dads, participants seek out media representations of transness which portray their collective identity positively. These "moments of recognition" (ibid, 37) may indicate marginalised trans people that there is a slowly growing acceptance and acknowledgement of trans as legitimate. For interviewees like Valentine, Lucas and Mars, who are in their early 20s, this documentary is one of the first media pieces available to them which focuses on trans lives, and particularly showcases trans masculine and trans men's perspectives. This is notable as there has been significant, often hostile, focus on trans women in media.

However, the limited representation of trans masculinity is not always an affirming experience. Valentine explains that they were unaware of the trans masculine character Max in the TV show 'The L Word' until they saw the storyline mentioned in 'Disclosure', and although they felt positive about seeing this character, they were

ultimately disappointed in the story: "I've not really seen many trans masculine characters. And like I've never seen the 'L Word' so I didn't know. Like, obviously, Max is in that. When they went through that, I was like, oh, this is good. And then like, I was like, oh, wait. This didn't end well, unfortunately!" I remark on this in a fieldnote, reflecting that the show looks at "trans masc experiences through a lesbian lens, starting with a positive representation but this quickly soured" (Fieldnote020720). As the show progressed Max fell victim to several tropes about trans men; taking black market testosterone to begin transitioning, the character, played by an actor who is nonbinary, became aggressive and ultimately was ostracised by his female friends before falling unintentionally pregnant. Max's story was never further resolved. The ways in which characters like Max are portrayed conveys to trans people that escape is not always available in entertainment.

For Rei, there is a further edge to portrayals of trans masculinity and trans men, as they note below:

"I think it's because trans guys are being told that now you have male privilege. Now everything's wonderful. Now you can live as a man and you get all the benefits of being a man. I talked to my therapist about it and she also said, yeah, it's also a huge problem because so many trans masculine people experience abusive relationships and have experienced a lot of violence. And they feel that they can't talk about it because when they do talk about it, they're met with, oh no, you have male privilege. Of course you're not being abused. Of course you're not experiencing violence. That's not a man."

Rei's words here highlight a hidden form of violence that links to the concept of toxic masculinity, showing how gender stereotypes of maleness are insidious in minimising traumatic experiences. Abusive relationships and domestic violence cannot be experienced by men due to their "male privilege", the idea that because they are male or masculine presenting, they are not *real* men if they are being abused. This is a dangerous and narrow perception of masculinity, trans or cisgender. Further, trans men may face hostility even if they do seek help or access services related to domestic violence, or face rejection from such services due to cissexist assumptions of their masculinity (Seelman, 2015).

Similarly, the politics of being transgender as 'debated' in especially news media create an atmosphere of hostility which filters into trans experiences at a collective level. Speaking on BBC Newsnight in 2020, Father Ted creator Graham Linehan compared gender affirming healthcare to Nazi experimentation during the Holocaust. Though his comments were swiftly condemned, the influence of a media personality drawing this kind of comparison in the first place is concerning. In my fieldnotes, I reference this specifically as "deeply offensive!" and note the framing of the debate: "GL frames debate through right/wrong during Nazi regime, he is on the "right" side of history" (Fieldnote100220). My own distress watching this comes through in my fieldnotes too; I use multiple exclamation points and several times note how angry and upset I feel.

Aversion to trans identities can be seen in posts such as this Tweet, which links violence and a hypothetical child disclosing that they are trans:

Figure 5: Twitter screenshot

The aggression of this imagery, where the viewer is forced to look down the barrel of a handgun, is an extreme expression of how trans people are viewed - a threat requiring a violent reaction. The perception of transness as something miserable, deviant, or even dangerous, has been present in UK media for some time. As Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent (2020) explain in the introduction to their special issue of The Sociological Review, the UK has seen a substantial growth in anti-trans public feeling since the 2017 announcement of a governmental review of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. The negative reaction to such reforms, in particular a process of self-determination to change the sex marker on a birth certificate, has been compounded by opinion pieces published in a range of media outlets such as The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Times and the Daily Mail. Drawing on the work of writers like Germaine Greer and Janice Raymond, media hostility in the UK is reflecting a long-standing sex/gender essentialist position where trans women are an especial threat to cis safety. This hostility spreads beyond impacting not only trans women but can affect anyone who identifies under the trans or gender diverse umbrella.

Paula discusses the power of this type of discourse in delaying or denying a realisation and acceptance of being trans:

"I think the nail in coffin, which put me in a box for the next 30 years or so, I was around 20. And it was the time that Germaine Greer became a big name. She said something

194

along the lines of being a woman and not having a penis. And I thought, if an important

person like that is saying that, then obviously I'm not trans."

Paula goes on to speak of finally coming to terms with their feelings about their gender, having struggled with depression and suicidal ideation for many years. Because of the importance placed on the rhetoric of someone like Germaine Greer, who was a respected and acclaimed voice of (radical) feminism, Paula felt unable to claim a trans identity until later in life. They use the phrase 'nail in the coffin', evoking a sense of dread and association with death and finality, to describe how this made them feel. They lived for many years in denial of their transness and nonbinary identity, and now at the age of 70, they are exploring gender more freely. They speak animatedly of wearing patches and t-shirts using the colours of the nonbinary pride flag, having overcome their hesitation and suppression of any sense of being trans. Paula does not directly express regret for years lost 'in a box', but speaks wistfully of how they see younger generations exploring and "playing with gender" in ways which, due to negative perceptions of transness, felt unsafe to them in their youth. The following quote from *Out* magazine online addresses the age of transition, noting the intergenerational connections between trans people:

"As nonbinary identity and gender nonconformity have become more mainstream,

they're sometimes characterized as a new phenomenon. This is not only insulting to

people like me — who are over 40 — but it's also insulting to imply that young people

don't know what they're doing, are formless, and not to be taken seriously. This is a

double-edged sword because, yes, it's on the cover of TIME, but when it's on the cover

of TIME, it's going to be a 13-year-old because that's what's palatable to the general public. The media wants to put the most digestible face on nonbinary identities so that they can sell more magazines."

Additionally, the quote highlights a further media influence on perceptions of trans people; reinforcing the notion that trans and non-binary identities as new while simultaneously using these 'trends' to show only youthful people and ignoring the age diversity of transitioning.

There can also be seen some tension between Paula's primary and secondary socialisations here (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013); Paula's primary socialisation from childhood situates transness as morally dubious, where their more recent social experience with younger generations disputes this version of morality. Paula's strong emotions towards their trans identity reflects this contrast, as their life trajectory has developed from dark and melancholy rejection of a core part of themselves, to a heartfelt embrace of their trans self.

5.3.3 Distress and the stigma turbine

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the contextual winds of the stigma turbine represent the historical, sociocultural, institutional and commercial winds which can fuel (de)stigmatisation (Mirabito, 2016). It is these factors of the stigma turbine which are the focus of this section.

In Paula's childhood experiences, sociocultural currents at the time were significantly anti-trans and thus, they also perceived their own transness as damaging. Debi has also experienced this, noting that her upbringing and childhood with a strict father from a military background influenced the stigmatisation she felt as an out of place child, one who did not fit with the sociocultural norms of masculinity which were so meaningful for her father:

"I first knew I wanted to be a girl when I was 8, and had a girlfriend whose mother was happy to have me dressed in some of her daughter's clothes when I played, or stayed, at their house. I felt so happy there, and when my mother found out she still let me go. When my father found out I was banned from seeing her and sent to an all boys' boarding school to be made a 'man'. That failed as I was soon playing the girls parts on school plays and being 'befriended' by older boys. I left school and returned home when my father left the military and tried to be the boy my father wanted me to be."

Debi tried for a long time to conform to a masculinity that she did not feel comfortable or aligned with, in order to please her father and live up to his ideals for his son. As a member of the military, Debi's father was part of an institution deeply permeated by cultural norms of masculinity which require boys and men to suppress emotions and show stoicism and independence (Way et al., 2014). Her father never realised that he in fact had a daughter, and Debi describes his frustrations that his "son" did not behave as boys should:

197

"Any softness, weakness or emotion was not acceptable and boys were tough and unruly. I never felt that I was like that - I was bookish, quiet, cried when I watched films and was always be told to 'behave like a boy'. I was brought up to believe girls should be the opposite of boys."

Rei reflects on these cultural norms too, discussing what they have seen as a lack of understanding about trans men and how masculinity is represented culturally through similar norms of emotional stoicism:

"I think trans guys are still fairly invisible, which is a shame really. I'm not sure why... I think it's because trans guys are being told that now you have male privilege. Now everything's wonderful. Now you can live as a man and you get all the benefits of being a man. I talked to my therapist about it and she also said, yeah, it's also a huge problem because so many trans masculine people experience abusive relationships and have experienced a lot of violence. And they feel that they can't talk about it because they when they talk about it, they're met with, oh, no, you have male privilege. Of course you're not being abused. Of course you're not experiencing violence... that's not a man."

Rei expresses their frustration and sadness, noting later in the interview that they had felt trapped in an abusive relationship by stigmas not only relating to domestic abuse, but also their trans masculine gender identity. The stigma surrounding domestic abuse towards men coalesces here with social norms of masculinity, denying trans men the reality of their experiences and potentially access to safe spaces to talk about those experiences.

Different types of space become significant in their potential to shape felt stigma, as Mirabito et al. (2016, 173) describe boundaries of space which can "bring aspects of people's identities into relief". Specifically, the authors mention retail and public spaces in the processes of felt stigma. Ali notes how in certain public spaces where their gender identity becomes more salient to them, such as in a student pub or out shopping with friends, they have encountered stereotyping and stigmatised assumptions about themselves from others:

"I think a lot of that is like obviously there's the whole thing of people thinking like oh you're just being trendy. People think that you're really sensitive as well. Like they're gonna offend you really easily. Which is annoying. And there's also this stereotype that I guess I've come into where everyone thinks that you are a white person who is assigned female at birth."

Cisgender people's stereotyping of transgender people as possessing characteristics aligned with their birth gender or based on traditionally gendered attributes (Gallagher and Bodenhausen, 2021), seems to occur alongside a sense of pity for trans people, who are often victims of passive harms such as exclusion and neglect (Gazzola and Morrison, 2014). Ali feels keenly the stereotype of being an overly sensitive person associated with being assigned female at birth, as traditional sociocultural norms of femininity assume expressive emotions and a delicate nature. In the social circumstances Ali talks about here, they also describe feeling annoyed and frustrated with how others perceive transness as "trendy". This is linked to a cultural perception

of gender nonconformity as a lifestyle choice, a gender identity that one performs in order to gain attention or popularity, to appear progressive, and to feel unique. The perception of transness as trendy has a genuine negative impact on the lives of those questioning their gender; as reported in the Daily Mail in 2019, a teenager took their own life as a direct consequence of feeling unable to talk about their gender. The teen's sister went on to say:

"Changing gender is becoming trendy. People should be able to express themselves however they want. It's not a fashionable thing. I don't see how someone would want to make changing gender a fun thing. People who are suffering are not having fun. It could make real sufferers feel like it's a bit of joke. There are people literally dying because they can't accept themselves."

The sociocultural winds constantly change across time; as the visibility of trans and gender diverse identities increases, so do perceptions of such identities as simply following a fashion that will soon decrease. As Hines (2020) points out, the culture wars around gender identity have a history which links back to second wave feminism, the nature of how we define humanity, and the patriarchal and colonial history of oppression to which those who do not conform have been subjected. Dismantling this oppression and enabling sociocultural winds to flow towards destigmatising difference (not only in terms of gender diversity, but also other, intersecting identities) is also strongly linked to the institutions and public policies which "can exacerbate, tamp down, or even potentially reverse the direction of the stigma turbine" (Mirabito et al. 2016, 173). It is to institutional winds that this section now turns.

The ideologies of governmental, religious, educational and medical institutions have great impact on the lives of citizens through communicating what is and what is not acceptable in society, including which behaviours and identities are legitimised. Healthcare and the medical establishment is an institution fraught with potentially distressing encounters for trans people, especially given the requirements of current legislation on gender recognition that one must have certain diagnoses in order to legally change gender. Casey talks about feeling a consistent sense of unease and anxiety relating to his access to gender-affirming treatment:

"The amount of, once I got into it, the amount of gatekeeping and paperwork and fussing involved is quite significant. And there's always this constant underlying fear that your supply is going to run out or you're going to get something refused or taken away from you. There's that constant underlying thing there.

So when I went to see my doctor, I knew what I wanted and I had done all my research. I know that if I was a 24 year old in that doctor's surgery, I would be terrified. I would not know the information that I knew going in myself because I wouldn't have done all the research that I did because I've been that 24 year old. And it kind of broke my heart a bit, if you're younger, you have less experience with things. For me the issue is more to do with the gatekeeping and the lack of quality [in healthcare], that for me is very significant."

For Casey, his experience with doctors in the NHS was mostly positive in part due to the fact that he approached his healthcare options armed with information, research, confidence, and the psychological resources and capital to advocate for himself. This is

not always the case however; even when a trans person does feel informed about their gender and how they would like to proceed with transition, they may be blocked or discouraged by the attitudes of the healthcare professionals with whom they come into contact. Transphobic views within the medical sphere can also be a barrier to accessing non-gender related care, where trans individuals are faced with microaggressions such as misgendering by those treating them. Additionally, the very fact of their trans status could eclipse their actual medical problems, where any complaint or illness is automatically assumed to be caused by simply being trans. This can also occur for other marginalised patients such as fat or neurodivergent people, where 'broken arm syndrome' manifests as the root cause of any health issues. For some trans people, the potential harms and distress associated with contacting medical practitioners prevents them from pursuing any kind of health intervention, resulting in poorer health outcomes overall. Due to legislation and legal frameworks however, they may have no choice but to subject themselves to possible distress in the healthcare system in order to officially live and be recognised as themselves.

Paula had a very distressing experience when they first tried to access gender-affirming care:

"I began to talk to my GP and NHS psychology about my gender situation. Well, the psychiatric hospital is about ten minutes' walk from my home and I got an appointment there with NHS psychology and unfortunately the psychologist I saw must have been a TERF, a reactionary feminist. Because they really want to take back feminism to the time, that kind of radical feminism in 60s, 70s, and they would say I was mansplaining. She said to me, you're just a man who envies women their femininity. And I was... I was

aghast. I was... I was gobsmacked. I remember walking home and there's a walkway out

of the psychiatric hospital with a handrail. I had tears streaming down my face and I was

actually screaming in distress. I was, I was crying, my heart was screaming, I was short

of breath. And I was thinking if there was a sheer drop on the other side of this handrail,

the only thing stopping me from throwing myself off was I couldn't grab hold of this

psychologist and throw her off with me. As we're plunging to our deaths, be screaming in

her ear. This is what it fucking feels like."

Paula explains a deeply upsetting experience with a medical professional who, instead of attempting to understand and help the person in their care, invalidated their non-binary gender identity and caused such significant distress that it almost formed into suicidal ideation. Paula describes wanting the psychologist to understand the depth of hurt and pain they felt, for her to experience that same distress. They allude to a loss of control, a feeling of unstoppable plummeting towards the ground through having their gender identity denied to them. Part of the reason why Paula felt this experience so strongly was that, as they discussed later in their interview, they had had to wait quite a long time to get the initial appointment in the first place. NHS waiting times for gender-related care such as psychologist or gender identity clinic appointments is shockingly long depending on where the trans person is located. According to a 2019 report in *The Guardian*, the longest waiting time for a first appointment at a gender clinic was more than three years. The limited services available to trans people in the UK may present a further barrier to overcoming or contesting gender diversity-related stigma, constraining their choices however unintentional the stigmatising effects may be (Mirabito et al., 2016).

Stigmatising effects related to restricted healthcare options is not just a challenge for those in the UK, however. Rei talks about the differences in accessing gender-affirming care in Denmark, pointing out that getting top surgery even through private health providers is virtually impossible:

"A difference between Denmark and other countries is that you're not allowed to go to a private clinic and have instances like top surgery. You can't go to private clinics in Denmark and just have top surgery. That's actually, that's forbidden."

Rei mentions that they had to go to Sweden in order to access a private clinic where they could get the top surgery they needed to live a happy, fulfilling life. They say that they were fortunate to be in position where this was an option, noting that they had the financial means to do so and were living close enough to a country in which trans healthcare was available. The need to travel for gender-affirming care may put this out of reach for some trans people, restricting their ability to access other markets in places like Sweden and contributing further to their disempowerment as consumers. As Katelyn Burns explains:

"The reality is trans people have little institutional scientific or academic power. Transition, in whatever way it works for an individual, is what trans people have known we needed for almost a hundred years now. But that's apparently not good enough. We also have to convince the cis people with power over our lives, doctors, therapists, medical researchers, and even journalists, that we know what's best for ourselves."

One of the ways in which trans people can regain some power is through marketing which centres their voices, tells their stories, and shows them as included alongside cis

people in everyday practices and interactions. The power of commercial winds to contribute towards destigmatising trans identities is the focus of the following section.

5.3.3.3 Commercial winds

Mirabito et al. (2016, 179) do also explore the ways in which market actors can contribute to destigmatising the marginalised in society, "by paying attention to labelling, stereotyping, and separating behaviours that promote discrimination". Marketing can interrupt stigmatising processes by distinctly showing similarities between in-groups and out-groups, disrupting stereotypes through positive portrayals and associations in messaging and communications. One example of a brand working towards inclusion and affirming portrayals of trans lives was the Gillette campaign which featured a real trans man in his teens learning how to shave for the first time. The short film 'First Shave' showed Samson and his father in front of a bathroom mirror, using Gillette products and talking happily together in the same ways that a cisgender teen and his father could. A blog post on news website The Drum describes the advert:

"In the video, Samson says he's "glad I'm at the point where I'm able to shave."

After his father offers tips and encouragement as Samson shaves his beard for the first time, he tells the camera "I'm at the point in my manhood where I'm actually happy. It's not just myself transitioning, it's everybody around me transitioning."

The onscreen text at the end of the film reads 'whenever, however it happens - your first shave is special.'"

The post goes on to point out that although there was some backlash to this film, Gillette stated that as one of the world's largest marketers to men, the brand felt it had a right and responsibility to address gender issues in its messaging. As part of their proposed Stigma Audit, Mirabito et al. (2016) advise brands to systematically assess the impact of their messaging on a range of stakeholders, with particular focus on stigmatised groups, and consider how their messaging may be received across different cultures. Conducting this type of audit and considering how marketing activities can work to disrupt stigmatising forces can be a powerful tool for brands to take responsibility and assess the potential consequences of their actions in the marketplace. For the trans people who may be seeing themselves represented in marketing for the first time, the feeling of empowerment from campaigns such as Gillette's short film can be immeasurable. One blogger pointed out that, as a black trans man, it was incredibly joyful to see themselves in an advert and motivated them to continue developing their marketing career so that they themselves could be involved in similar campaigns. Cassia says:

"Ultimately anything that normalizes the different? Amazing. I think it's my view anyway. And I like seeing more so in the broader representation that media culture. I do see more LGBT focused brands. They're doing bits and pieces here and there. And I think I'm seeing more and more where it's relevant."

Further, the inclusion of trans identities in marketing campaigns can be meaningful when considering the ways in which people who experience marginalisation across multiple identities may very rarely see their lives reflected in the advertising and media they consume. As Alex remarks, trans identities sometimes often feel like an

afterthought when brands may be looking at how to present more inclusive images of different kinds of consumer:

"I guess that stuff gets more inclusive of different body shapes up immediately becomes before trans communities."

It is also worth noting that it may not always be enough to create positive visibility in marketing, and that brands must also follow up that messaging with action in their policies and practices. Starbucks is one such brand which seems to create very mixed feelings among participants; some viewed their partnership with trans youth charity Mermaids as a positive step, where others pointed out that the reality for trans employees of the company is very different to the brand image it was perhaps aiming for with this campaign. The company has developed something of a reputation for its treatment of minoritised employees, as licensees seem to apply corporate policies on race and gender inconsistently, requiring intervention from the company's first ever Global Chief Inclusion and Diversity Officer (Hall et al., 2021). It is perhaps the dissonance between the Mermaids partnership and the negative perception of the company as an employer for trans people which continues to create ambiguity within the trans community.

5.3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the power of culture, marketing, and media in (re)creating social norms of gender. In looking at the ways in which the trans community as a

whole is represented and the prevalent narratives around transness at different points in a person's life, Paula's story helps to illustrate how this lack of power can impact consumers' wellbeing and emotions. Institutional power in the forms of healthcare, government legislation, and practices such as the use of algorithms on social media can act to create a sense of othering by presenting trans narratives as morally questionable, miserable or even dangerous. The powerlessness of trans people may also be extended into home and family life, where misrecognition of hurtful or harmful actions may often go unchallenged. Indeed as seen in Rei's story, even language itself can act to disempower through inflexibility in recognising gender diversity.

The feelings of vulnerability expressed by Paula and others is contextualised here through an understanding of a hostile cultural environment in contemporary Anglophone, Western society. Performing gender is tightly governed by sociocultural norms, so that even when binary trans people present as 'typically' feminine or masculine, they are criticised for perpetuating stereotypes. For nonbinary people, acceptance of their existence seems reliant on a white, middle class, able bodied presentation.

The sociocultural, institutional, and commercial winds as conceptualised through the stigma turbine help to highlight the wider, macro factors which also shape how gender diversity and different performances of gender are perceived; not only can culture shape the identities that are seen simply as following a trend or fashion in current society, but medical and governmental institutions have significant power in

delegitimising already culturally stigmatised identities. Although there is also power in marketing and media to destigmatise through promotions and campaigns which centre the experiences of marginalised identities such as Gillette's campaign featuring a young trans man, distress can be felt for both the individual trans person navigating and performing gender in this environment and collectively, for a broader trans community. The following chapter will consider distress and disempowerment further, by exploring safety and vulnerability in consumption spaces.

6. SAFETY AND VULNERABILITY IN CONSUMPTION SPACES
6.1 Introduction

Vulnerability is woven into the fabric of everyday life affecting decision-making across several areas of life like housing, education, work and family. Often, potential threats in society overlap with cultural anxieties, and responses to vulnerability can reflect wider ideological agendas (Thompson, 2005). Consumption ideology is embedded throughout the consumer journey and is broadly unconscious until the consumer is dissatisfied and considers making a change in their practices (Schmitt, Brakus and Biraglia, 2022). For vulnerable consumers however, change may not be straightforward or even possible. The marketplace is not apolitical; in striving against inequalities, Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) find that consumption becomes a forum for expressing political ideologies more than traditional political participation. Marketplace participation and access to space is central to full participation as a consumer; where access is limited or prohibited based on group characteristic such as race or gender, an individual is excluded from part of everyday life and become powerless (Saatcioglu and Corus, 2016).

For trans consumers, navigating spaces is a complex process. Safety and vulnerability in physical and digital environments may be both overt and subtle; openly transphobic actions or policies, dog piling (where an individual is inundated with attacks from multiple online accounts) and trolling, micro-aggressions such as misgendering and asking invasive questions, are frequently experienced by trans people. Space is a resource for the construction and transformation of identity, manifestation of culture, and negotiation of social interactions (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2021). As these authors

further argue, a kind of cultural inequality is created through the devaluation of certain consumer identities; the deliberate contesting of this devaluation by marginalised consumers takes place in both physical and digital spaces (ibid), where stereotypes can be countered and quashed. This chapter will discuss safety and vulnerability in consumption spaces as experienced by trans consumers.

6.2 Trans bodies: internalised space

As Mirabito et al (2016, 175) note: "many stigmatised groups become more vulnerable as a result of stigmatisation"; as trans consumers are marginalised due to non-conformity with dominant gender norms, the stigma of trans is perpetuated into further vulnerability. Aware of the devalued position of their identity in society, stigmatised individuals can then experience internalised stigma which in turn affects self-worth (Bos et al., 2013). Lovelock (2016, 5) explains that "in an intensely visual consumer culture, the external body has become one of the primary signifiers through which we are encouraged to 'read' the affective and psychological wellbeing of others and ourselves". The body then becomes the mechanism for interpreting feelings of vulnerability, particularly the reduced self-worth that stems from stigmatisation. Thus, the site of stigma forces becomes the body itself. Ahmed (2006b, 9) notes that "spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body." In other words, spaces and bodies cannot be separated, the bodily experience of space orients us to our world.

Cassia experienced a moment of shock with her body, as it began to exhibit feminine characteristics through her hormone treatment:

"I literally woke up one morning and started because I didn't recognise my arms... the muscle mass and the hair was changing, it altered and disappeared. There's a lot of odd feelings, you notice things when you're alone in the shower."

Cassia notes how small differences in her body made her feel uncomfortable at first, as the changes were so minute that only she could notice them and when she did so, it gave her a start initially. She talks about muscle mass changing and the redistribution of body fat as she continued taking oestrogen, and feeling a little apprehensive alongside her joy as her body shape became more obviously feminine. This Twitter user responds to a post about weight loss. Noting that in the original tweet, the poster addresses weight gain during the COVID-19 pandemic and the discursive incongruence of not wishing to "get fat" and "preaching all bodies are beautiful", the response notes the specific difficulties for trans and nonbinary people in terms of weight:

"Worth considering. Troubled terrain for #trans and #nonbinary people like myself with significant body image issues, especially emphasized as a public figure in media frequently"

Body image studies with trans people have been focused on bringing the body into line with gender identity, aligning with ideals such as thinness for trans women and muscle mass for trans men (Galupo, Cusack and Morris, 2021). For Georgie, body image is a difficult issue:

"I intermittently experience gender dysphoria. And so, you know, the tragedy of being agender for me is that I can't transition in one direction or another. I'll always be sorry. Not when you reach a point of kind of comfort where you can say this makes sense. I know who I am."

Georgie likes an androgynous presentation which fits more comfortably for their agender identity, but this creates problems for their self-worth as they feel unable to fully embody themselves by transitioning in any way. They are stuck in a liminal position of both inhabiting a body which can present as masculine, feminine or neither depending on how they feel, but is also capable of multiple presentations none of which truly reflect their sense of their lack of gender. Bringing their body into alignment for Georgie is an impossible task, and an ultimately nonsensical one, as they will always wish to change things about their body and will never be entirely corporeally comfortable. Alex says about top surgery:

"I have worn binders since coming out but surgery has always been a goal. It would mean I can be more comfortable with my body and not have the constant anxiety and dysphoria that comes with it. This surgery is crucial to help me feel comfortable in my own skin and even be able to do simple things such as swimming, finally feeling at ease."

Alex mentions feeling constant anxiety and dysphoria in their body, something to which I could relate personally. Carmel, Hopwood and dickey (2014) mention body checking in discussing bodily dysphoria, a practice which both cis and trans people

may undertake constant scrutinising or critiquing of their body's appearance. For some trans people, feeling discomfort with their body and consistently checking how they look could be a protective action, reassuring them that they are passing or presenting in safe ways for the social interactions or situations they are in. I also experienced feelings of unease with my body, writing in my research diary that "I have conflicted feelings about this [chest binding] as it is something I would like to try myself, not as an exploration of my gender identity but as an expression of my body. It feels disrespectful somehow to those who experience gender dysphoria and bind to address this - particularly trans men who seem to practice binding every day". This fieldnote was written prior to my realisation of my own gender identity and reflects my anxiety of stepping on toes within the trans community. This further links to the idea of being 'trans enough' which was discussed previously, where the borders and boundaries of transness are subject to their own form of policing through divisions within the community. However, interpretations of trans embodiment may have commonalities as well as differences. Author Thomas Page McBee hints at discomfort in his body but in a different context:

"those of us that enjoy a legible gender identity regardless of the complexity about how we feel internally need to contrast that experience with people whose very physical bodies challenge our culture's narrow definitions of gender identity. I find that my ability to say 'fuck gender' increases in proportion to how safe I feel in my body."

For McBee, safety in his body directly impacts the extent to which he feels able to express his trans masculinity, however he still feels discomfort in similar ways to

Georgie and Alex. In his book Amateur, he traces his experiences with his body in learning to box for a charity match. He talks about how through transition, he has worked hard for his masculine body but still persistently underestimates himself in the ring. He is concerned that he has not always been a man, that his testosterone is synthetic, and thus so too, his masculinity. The stigma of being trans in a hyper-masculine setting like a boxing gym creates insecurities for him that he may not have felt in other gym or fitness spaces.

In an article for the Daily Mail, Alex explained that "when he first transitioned, his 'biggest insecurity' was the belief that he would never look the way he wanted to look as a guy. Bodybuilding helped him transform his body and overcome that." For Alex, his external appearance was a source of vulnerability as he felt that he could be unable to achieve his masculine body ideal. Very small masculine bodies are equally stigmatised as very muscular feminine bodies, and cultural ideals expect that women should be thin and toned, and men strong and muscled (Anderson and Bresnahan, 2013). Whereas Thomas began to explore his relationship to masculinity and violence through taking up boxing, Alex sought to avoid the stigma of a smaller masculine body by participating in bodybuilding.

This emphasises the different concerns individuals may have in different social spaces, employing different coping mechanisms in different contexts. Hill and Sharma (2020) describe non defensive coping in terms of giving up or giving in, where consumers acquiesce to the circumstances of their vulnerability. Although Alex has not strictly given up or given in, he is altering his body mass and shape to fit with dominant

masculine stereotypes of a strong, muscular build to cope with his feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. This serves as a further reinforcement of the dominant cisnormative masculinity. In addition, anticipating rejection of his identity as male may also affect how trans people like Alex negotiate social interactions; loss of confidence or avoiding interactions where there is too great a risk or fear of rejection may affect the ability to seek support or pursue relationships (Link and Phelan, 2014). Consumer coping strategies include the neglect or avoidance of consumption in terms of technology or eating locally (Mick and Fournier, 1998; Bingen, Sage and Sirieux, 2011), but there is no avoidance of a gender identity.

Instead, consumers may choose to avoid circumstances in which their gender identity may become a risk or point of rejection in social interactions, choosing to cope with stigma and vulnerability not through straightforward avoidance but through careful curation of their consumption options and gender presentation depending on the context. This is particularly salient on social media, where a curated expression of the self is easily achieved through selection of image, filters, descriptions etc. Katelyn Burns suggests that:

"the early internet not only helped trans people organize politically, but also gave trans people access to transition resources and language to describe their gender identity on a massive scale. Starting with the rise of blogs in the early 2000s, trans people created internet spaces and conversations for their own survival."

However, as EJ Dickson explained in a 2019 article for *Rolling Stone*, social media platforms are not necessarily safe spaces in themselves:

"in the past, both LGBTQ people and sex workers alike have complained about being censored by Instagram, even if they have not violated the platform's terms of service (the most commonly cited TOS violations are usually related to nudity or sexually explicit content, which are prohibited by the platform). And while some feel that such censorship is merely the result of an unreliable or inconsistent algorithm, others have alleged that the platform specifically targets marginalized bodies"

Another trans social media user protested in a conversation with BBC News that the censorship of her TikTok videos further marginalises not only her but also her followers who are trans and benefit from seeing her content:

"It makes me mad when my content is removed. There are some videos that I spend hours making... and to have one of those videos removed really discourages me... There are countless amounts of teenagers and adults who have reached out to me and thanked me for putting myself out there to be seen. To block something that can bring awareness to the trans community, when we already have so much hate and disgust coming toward us - where else are we supposed to go?"

As Schroder (2021, 377) notes, "algorithms pick up cultural biases and feed them back into the online environment, without much awareness from users of what is happening, or how their social media feed is built." In other words, social media may

be reflecting stigmas and stereotypes commonly found in cultural discourse despite the significant diversity of social media users. The efforts of social media companies to address such biases are questionable, even though social media appears to now be transcending online boundaries and shaping culture itself (Appel et al., 2019). In the cases of Instagram and TikTok, whether through deliberate policies or stigma-learning algorithms, the message is virtually the same for trans people seeking to use digital space – nonconformity may not be welcomed. This again hints at the tensions in presenting an authentic self; one may be stigmatised by presenting as trans, or be marginalised through the very mechanisms of the platform as algorithms identity posts as unsuitable. On more positive lines, digital spaces may offer anonymity and ways in which to conceal a stigmatised identity through managing appearance and behaviours so as not to reveal transgender status. However, there are consumption contexts where there is no option but to interact and navigate space in person, such as physical retail and service spaces. Physical servicescapes may reinforce cisnormativity in different ways to those online, as is explored in the following sections.

6.3 Servicescapes - tensions in physical spaces

The reinforcement of cisnormativity in retail environments can make shopping for clothes, a key part of gender expression, an unsettling or peculiar undertaking for those who fail to conform. Ali remarks on the "extreme and noticeable divide" between men's and women's areas of Superdrug:

"I remember walking into Superdrug. I think it was one day and literally it was like the shop was split down the middle and there was like women's stuff on one side, men's stuff

on the other. Yeah. I just I just remember very clearly it was quite an extreme and

noticeable divide."

This is typical of almost every retail space, where products are separated in line with the gender binary. Although unnoticeable to the majority of consumers, such gendered divisions exclude trans people, and (re)produce and reinforce gender norms. McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017) identify these moments as 'aftershocks' in experiences of vulnerability; times when a person is reminded of their transness as 'other'. Beginning her transition, Carrie was eager to embrace a feminine appearance:

"I wanted to basically get rid of my entire male wardrobe immediately and replace it

completely with feminine stuff. So that was very much a, you know, replacing one lot of

M&S jeans from one side of the shop with the stuff from the other side of the shop."

For Carrie, switching her gender presentation from male to female simply involved buying feminine versions of some of the male clothing she owned; she was unconcerned with passing as female to other cisgender people as she simply wanted to express an authentically gendered self. She notes that the retail environment was unmistakably divided in two, with men's clothing on one side and women's clothing on the other, so all she needed to do was change locations. As she talks about this, she shrugs and smiles at the oddness of this experience; Carrie is transgressing the boundary of binary gender simply by moving from one side of the shop to another, highlighting how everyday activities like shopping for clothes are highly gendered (Doan, 2010). Although there is a surreal element to Carrie's experience, she doesn't

seem to have found this difficult or uncomfortable - in fact, the opposite, as she happily recalls being able to finally purchase clothing and items for the feminine appearance she desired.

In contrast, Valentine feels uneasy as the retail environment prescribes what is appropriate along binary lines:

"it's like a mix between menswear and women, a lot of the time I found in mainstream shops, it's difficult to find stuff that's specific because they all kind of very binary and very this is what men want. I feel like it can be kind of alienating."

In separating men's and women's apparel in clearly defined sections of the store, the retail environment becomes discomfiting and alienating for those who gender expression is more fluid, as Valentine notes. Providing a choice between men's or women's sections, and a further plethora of choices within those sections, creates difficulties in knowing what may be suitable in terms of conformity, but inappropriate in terms of authentic presentation. The unintended consequence of marketing's tendency to embrace choice then becomes a trap for a trans person who must navigate a marketplace in which they are habitually utterly invisible. This speaks to the mutually constituted nature of gender, whereby the individual can only partially control how their gender is perceived, for example through clothing choices (Doan, 2010). The option to choose clothing which may not necessarily conform with assigned gender at birth and the freedom to explore a retail space which is less heavily separated by the gender binary is something that charity shops frequently offer trans

people more than traditional high street stores. Several participants mentioned feeling a greater sense of safety in exploring charity shops as the divide between a men's section and a women's section was less clearly defined. Sal says:

"It has always been a challenge for me to be shopping because of my own fussiness combined with a tight budget and very distinctly feminine figure (although I am starting to lose it with practice). People in charity shops are less likely to come up to you and ask if you need help and are less inclined to judge as well. Having worked in several, I prefer to let people wander anyhow; it's slowed down significantly from fast fashion shops like Primark. I have found that when I find the perfect piece for my wardrobe I have to immediately wear it for a few days; it's something new and validating, and I cannot resist wearing it in."

Sal mentions shopping on a budget and at a slower pace than is generally found in mainstream retail. He goes to on to say that the atmosphere and noise in larger stores also puts him off shopping there, as he finds it difficult to concentrate and a very uncomfortable experience. Contrasting this with charity shops, he finds elements like the pace and lighting much more conducive to finding items he likes. When he is successful, he "cannot resist" the validation and joy of wearing the new piece as soon as possible. Valentine also finds charity shops more inviting, describing their shopping experiences in mainstream stores as "alienating":

"I need to find things that fit me but also, there's a kind of personal thing where, if I look in the mirror and I'm like yeah this feels good. And a lot of the time, I do spend a lot of

time in charity shops and that kind of thing. Then, they obviously have sections, but...

it's a mix between menswear and women in mainstream shops, it's difficult to find stuff

that's specific because they all kind of very binary and very like 'this is what men want'.

And yeah, I feel that can be kind of alienating."

Sal also observed that staff in charity shops seemed to display a less judgemental or

suspicious approach to those purchasing second-hand items. The perceptions of

others, recognising (or in some cases, assuming) someone's gender can cause awkward

and tricky encounters with retail staff, as Casey explains:

"Pre transition was if I was shopping in the men's section and they'd made an

assumption that I was physically male and then they realised and then they kind of freak

themselves out."

Visible gender non-conformity, an appearance that is ambiguous with a binary gender

category, creates a threat to the social dominance of cis, hetero, white male capitalism

(Goldberg and Beemyn 2021), and can often result in hostility. As noted by Maciel and

Wallendorf (2021, 311), "[space] is an affordance of the social structure that materialises

power relations." Discomfort shown by staff or other consumers, such as the

experience described here by Casey, can contribute to negative feelings, making the

process of shopping, navigating consumer space to help trans people articulate their

authentic gender identity, a risky one. In 2016, a nonbinary trans customer in a New

York clothing store was allegedly barred from using the changing facilities which best

fit with their gender, saying that store employees' actions triggered intense gender dysphoria.

Similarly, Rei talks about feeling strong dysphoria due to standard sizing in retail stores for both men's and women's clothing, and recounts an incident with a staff member in Marks and Spencer where they wanted to try on an item from the men's section, and were refused access to any changing facilities. Although they say that they were able to brush off this incident, they simply handed the employee back the item and left the store. In this instance, a lack of congruence between Rei's androgynous gender presentation and the binary gender they were assumed by the employee to be created risk of further antagonism. Rei didn't make their purchase, but they also didn't change their gender presentation to avoid future vulnerability. Baker, Holland and Kaufman-Scarborough (2007, 170) describe this in their study with disabled consumers, noting "how strangers in the servicescape respond to a shopper's personal characteristics can affect whether a shopper feels welcome in a store or not".

Barker and Scheele(2019) explains that some trans people do alter their presentation in order to navigate public spaces more safely, presenting as more masculine or feminine depending on the perceived risk of harassment or threat. They describe this as a trans person's ability to 'shapeshift'. Trans people may learn in which situations and circumstances it is safe to present authentically, and in which it is safer to 'pass'. Ruvio and Belk (2018) argue that where a person has fully embraced their new gender identity and has reached a resolution of their identity, passing is no longer a

consideration, as "their new identity became authentic" (ibid, 108). However, for many trans people, passing sometimes becomes vital for evading physical violence.

'Passing' is a form of recreating gender displays "in order to render transgender status invisible to other in social interactions" (Marques 2019, 212). In this way, trans people 'shapeshift' to navigate social situations where their gender diversity could potentially result in confrontation. Ynda disguises their femininity to have some control over and manage how they are seen by others; they say:

"If I do choose to wear more strongly femme-coded styles of clothing, I'll usually either get changed at my destination or cover any skirt, playsuit or dress with a long coat, so as not to draw attention in more 'general public' spaces."

Ynda is aware of how their appearance may attract notice and thus self-polices by concealing their femininity, blending in while out in public spaces. However, passing as cisgender is not necessarily a goal for all transgender individuals and has been a topic of some controversy within trans communities. Influential writers like Kate Bornstein (1994, 125) have argued that passing "becomes the outward manifestation of shame and capitulation". In this way, passing by achieving aesthetics indistinguishable from other cisgender people is seen and judged negatively, as if embracing a form of gender oppression through conformity. Further, when passing as cisgender, a trans person could be afforded the privilege of such an identity, being in a position where they become an trespasser into dominant cisheteronormativity to "exploit the benefits" (Billard 2019, 471), while their passing identity simultaneously remains an

appropriation and not the 'real' thing. This then presents a further vulnerability, the threat of discovery or being outed as trans.

Vulnerability to an identity being accepted exists even in spaces which should ostensibly be safe or resistant to its effects. Casey explains his experiences in a gay bar, where his gender and right to be present in a gendered bathroom was questioned by cisgender LGBTQ patrons. He talks about feeling out of place and uncomfortable; even though his interrogators identified as LGBTQ+, they felt able to question his presence. Orne (2013) points out that just because a space is labelled as queer or LGBTQ+ friendly, does not mean that the 'othering' of transgender and nonbinary individuals will automatically not take place. This seems contradictory with research findings on therapeutic servicescapes, where being among like-minded consumers creates a sense of safety with positive, restorative emotional benefits (Higgins and Hamilton, 2019).

Within the LGBTQ+ community, there has been much internal debate around the inclusion of trans identities; too gay or queer, not gay or queer enough, the boundaries of being LGBTQ+ are constantly shifting as identities within the acronym are themselves in flux while at the same time, "vying for hegemony" (Weiss 2011, 501). The cathartic role of a place or space in providing relief from stress and boosting a feeling of wellbeing, features of therapeutic spaces (Rosenbaum et al., 2020), is counteracted by negative perceptions and interactions. The safety of an LGBTQ+ space is no longer guaranteed, the social and psychological benefits of somewhere trans people might develop attachments and connections are lost. These conflicts and divisions can be

stressful particularly for those who are newly 'out' or coming to terms with an LGBTQ+ identity.

There is contention between cisgender and transgender perspectives of queer history; the events of the Stonewall riots in New York is the better-known and culturally more influential origin story of the LGBT movement. However, even at the time there was much misunderstanding among the community over transsexuality (many prominent figures like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson would probably not have described themselves as 'transgender'). The queerness of trans people was and is misunderstood; for some gay men and lesbians, the challenge presented by trans people to hegemonic understandings of sexual attraction and gender causes discomfort (Faye 2021).

The threads of transphobia are thus still woven into LGBTQ+ spaces. This can be seen in the contemporary separatism of some lesbian and gay members of the community, who wish to disassociate with the 'T', claiming that gay, lesbian and bisexual "rights, culture, and history are now under threat"3 from transgender people's existence. This creates fractures in the community, as reflected by these Tumblr and Twitter users:

"Some of you insist that I am holding us back... conceding people like me does nothing but harm people in your own community"

"In regards to #IAmNonbinary, I had a hard time being able to come out due to people not taking the identity seriously, saying it's not real. I came out as genderqueer 12 years

ago and was immediately ridiculed by other transgender folx. Told I had to pick "one or the other".

The first user is a nonbinary person who uses neopronouns and expresses frustration (using 'vent' and 'rant' in the meta tags of the post) at the intracommunity conflict around different gender identities. The second post comes from a nonbinary person who experienced prejudice from other transgender people who could not to see beyond the gender binary. The user further points out in another Tweet that gender is not a hierarchy ("One is not better than any other and there's no point in ridiculing someone for their gender"). Discord among LGBTQ+ people on the borders of identity and negotiations of who can appropriately claim which label even within the 'trans' umbrella are a consistent feature of discussions online (Sutherland, 2021). These conversations often divert the attention of mainstream media from deeper inequalities and struggles faced by LGBTQ+ people, hurting the efforts of activists in tackling structural inequalities faced by marginalised LGBTQ+ people.

The boundaries of 'trans' in particular are contested, as some feel that trans can only represent a desire and intention for medical transition, while others feel that social transition (regardless of medical interventions) makes one 'trans enough'. Rhetoric around the acceptability of LGBTQ+ identities and the inclusion of transness, and perceived threats to the safety of (cisgender) women in spaces like toilets (Jones and Slater, 2020) have become more commonplace in the cisgender majority UK news media, putting trans people in harm's way in everyday interactions.

Access to facilities such as bathrooms and toilets, for example, becomes difficult as there is a risk of hostility when using public spaces; Sanders and Stryker (2016) criticise the Anglo-American cultural tendency to ascribe social gender to secondary sex characteristics and genitals in their discussion of public restroom design. Discussing transgender people's access to public transport facilities, participants specifically mention feeling as though harassment and discrimination they frequently experience from cisgender passengers is due to their visible gender non-conformity (Lubitow et al., 2017).

Actions of non-trans users who seek to regulate who accesses facilities often stem from a perception of trans women particularly as dangerous, leading to questioning and confrontation of anyone who does not visibly conform to feminine social norms (Patel 2017). Avoidance then becomes a coping strategy for trans people; being reluctant to access toilets or changing rooms in case of harassment places limits on use of space, as they are unable to travel too far from home. This limiting also impacts on physical health and wellbeing, as Casey describes: "If I could, I would avoid going to the bathroom. I worked to the point where I think on multiple occasions, I would rather wet myself than go to the bathroom." Bathrooms have become a core issue in media coverage of transness; the exclusion of "males" (usually referring to trans women and assigned male at birth (AMAB) nonbinary people) from women only spaces such as toilet facilities has been positioned as addressing the 'danger' posed by access via self-determination of gender identity (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020). This positioning, that trans people pose an undetermined threat if allowed to freely access everyday consumer facilities, extends beyond physical spaces to online ones too.

6.4 Digital spaces

Seemingly safe online spaces, like social media platforms where trans people can find each other and share experiences, stories and build community, have recently come under fire for removing LGBTQ+ content while failing to address bullying and online trolling directed towards their users. In a piece published by BBC News, a TikTok user spoke about the removal of her videos as discouraging, asking "To block something that can bring awareness to the trans community, when we already have so much hate and disgust coming toward us - where else are we supposed to go?" LGBTQ+ users are exposed to the risk of transphobic comments, dog-piling and other forms of harassment, when sharing any kind of content from their lives on social media.

A Tumblr user talks about the outing of beauty YouTuber Nikkie Tutorials; having been victimised through blackmail into disclosing her trans identity, the user expresses their admiration for Nikkie's "bravery" and open support of LGBTQ+ causes. Another user reflects on reactions to Nikkie's coming out describes trans lives as a "tightrope walk to make sure that whatever cis people can clock us as, it isn't trans", indicating the risk in presenting a trans self online. Charlotte experienced online transphobia more indirectly, yet the experience did not have any less of an effect on Charlotte:

"they had up on the International Day Against Homophobia, a post about how inclusive they are in football. And there were really, really homophobic and transphobic

comments on the twitter page. And they did not react on their twitter page and they did not react when I wrote them."

Charlotte took a risk and attempted to address this instance of transphobia online by drawing attention to the organisation's social media representatives, but Charlotte's concerns were ignored, making Charlotte feel powerless and invisible. Ali notices that "people are much more likely to be mean about online, behind a screen. Yeah. So I think people are a lot more judgmental".

In contrast, when Ali moved away from home to university they found that face-to-face interactions were significantly more positive and they gained a supportive friend group. This is not to argue that any and all online spaces are risky or unsafe for trans people; for many, social and digital media represent an opportunity to explore and experiment with gender. Video game character creation for example can enable a closeted trans person a way to express their true gender identity in a "non-threatening" environment (Arcelus et al., 2017: 22). Charlotte mentions doing this with online gaming, where Charlotte can make connections with new people who have no prior history or assumptions of Charlotte's gender.
.
A Reddit user talks about Animal Crossing and their character giving them the chance to explore different fashions and clothing options without having to put themselves into a physical retail space, hinting at the risk they feel in going to a mall: "Animal Crossing has been so fun! It's giving me inspiration without needing to go to the mall (cos you know why)". As in cisgender populations, gaming is also a way to cope with

feelings of distress amongst transgender people (Arcelus et al., 2017). Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) is a Nintendo Switch game which allows players to build their own paradise island, with multiple customisations including character appearance. Players must earn bells to purchase new items for their island, so gameplay is led by a kind of marketplace structure. Social interaction with the island's animal residents and other players online is one of the key aspects of the game's striking success during COVID-19 lockdowns (Zhu, 2021).

Interestingly, Arcelus et al. (2017) note in their study of gaming in transgender populations, there were higher instances of social transition amongst those participants who were gamers than those who were not. This perhaps suggests that a freedom to explore, gentle pace, and soothing and calm aesthetic as in ACNH provides a confidence in gender expression and identity which can then be carried through into the real world. Thus, the digital space of ACNH, which was not specifically designed to enable consumer identity projects, has been repurposed to celebrate and inspire (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2021), with interactions between gamers providing camaraderie and connection.

Similarly, sites such as Pinterest, where users gather visuals and images themed together into collections, have grown in popularity amongst those exploring gender diversity. Debi says of Pinterest:

"you can kind of experiment with like different colour combinations and like, oh, I wonder what, you know, 50s style would look like or you know, as opposed to, you know,

in a slinky dress and all that sort of stuff. They're really kind of nice place to just explore that."

Debi is able to curate images of her ideal gender presentation using Pinterest; her home life is a source of distress as she struggles to conform to stereotypically male norms and behaviours as is expected of her, but Pinterest is a safe online space for her to imagine and picture her authentic self. In this way, although Debi's physical body may feel "out of place", she can find a place where she feels "comfortable and safe in the world" (Ahmed 2006b, 158). Similarly, a transgender employee of Pinterest itself noted that the site "has been a great source of not just inspiration for what I want to wear, but of self-actualisation. It's helped me see what's possible for me during a time of immense growth." Pinterest is a haven for Debi, away from the risk of family disruption and confrontation. She feels she is lucky to have found a safe online space for experimentation, as reaching a point of confidence in performing an authentic transgender identity can be taxing. As this Twitter user says:

"So I just went for a walk, first time out fully as myself and I feel amazing! #transgender"

Another user replies, noting how the person's happiness can be seen in the original Tweet's accompanying photo of a trans woman on a country path, wearing a dress and makeup, smiling at the camera. In their reply, they use heart and smiling emojis to express their own joy at their friend's photo:

Yay! Congratulations 💖💖💖

It's a shame to not experience nice weather like this as the person you know you are. You look really nice too, btw. It's obvious how happy you are 😊

Figure 6: Twitter screenshot

As also discussed in the section on authentic self in Chapter Five, Jones (2020, 260) notes that the ability to perform an authentic identity "bolstered feelings of self-worth". The Twitter users quoted above include hashtags and phrases like 'rebirthday', 'living authentic' and 'out fully as myself' in describing how they feel now they are transitioning. They talk about 'living their truth' and being happy. Aultman (2019, 1) discusses happiness as frequently echoing adjustments to everyday practices, in which is can be "constructed around anything that might provide a sense of longevity and stability" in the face of insecurity in life. Georgie describes this as "queer joy", as a sense of being seen by others as one sees oneself, feeling authentically male, female or neither. Heber (2020) likens this feeling of acceptance and happiness to sunflowers turning to face dawn, flourishing and growing in the sunlight.

Queer joy represents the counter to many tragic narratives of LGBTQ+ lives, joy as a possibility and potential for change and catalyst for acceptance. Queer joy can come in small everyday moments; in the following quotes, a Tumblr user expresses their joy at using makeup in affirming their femininity, while another expresses their joy when they are not seen as feminine:

"okay so I just wanna add this to my blog but today I perfectly applied eyeliner for the first time and I felt so euphoric!! It somehow managed to make my entire face look more feminine and it made me so happy!"

"what makes me so euphoric is weARING OVERSIZED CLOTHES nobody can see my breasts in them and also they're really comfy and I've been mistaken for a guy in them before because I have short hair too, well I'm agender but at least they didn't think I was a girl so :D"

Another user then adds:

"Oversized clothes own my soul ngl. "At least they didn't think I was a girl" that is a mood right there."

For these trans and agender people, gender euphoria comes from either presenting as their authentic self (or being unable to be gendered at all!) through simple items such as makeup and clothing. The user who speaks of oversized clothing finds euphoria in this lack of categorisation, which helps reinforce their authentic sense of self. The playfulness of these posts also alludes to the ways in which trans can be "imagining other worlds with a utopian ethic" (Lehner 2022, 101). The utopian ethic the author discusses here can be a collective celebration of trans, moving towards futures through social justice, in which assimilation into normative gender practices and value assessment on the basis of aesthetics are irrelevant. In their exploration of trans failure as a productive means of self-articulation beyond oppressive binary cultural norms,

234

the author considers the fact that trans people have become more visible in consumer culture as down to the possibilities in transitioning also becoming increasingly visible. This does not directly address the tensions within the term trans however. A critique of this could be that there should also be space for those trans individuals for whom trans playfulness with gender to achieve joy is neither comfortable nor safe; trans can encompass so much and so many that even from within, there can be disagreement.

Intracommunity conflict over specific language and labels particularly within the LGBTQ+ umbrella, have raised internal debates about membership and being "trans enough" (Sutherland, 2021). Community, a sense of belonging, is important to trans people of all ages; as Paula points out, older trans people like themselves struggled to make connections with others, and that this has become much easier for younger generations through the use of social media. They consider the openness and warmth of younger trans people towards others in the LGBTQ+ community a strength, gained through connection on and offline to experiences similar to and different from their own. Georgie too reflects on the intergenerationality of the trans community:

"I think it comes from that having traversed vulnerability. I think you see a lot of these older trans folks taking younger trans folks under their wing because they know how isolating it can be. How much of an upheaval it can be, like the huge changes that happen in your life."

Through social media, many trans people have discovered stories and experiences like and unlike their own, enabling connections and sharing that were impossible due to

geographical constraints previously. In the case of transgender people, familial support may be awkward, embarrassing, or even completely unavailable. Online, the community can support each other through the challenges of transitioning, providing emotional support as well as cognitive support in the form of knowledge and advice (Ozanne and Ozanne, 2020). Extending beyond virtual boundaries, there is active material support in exchanging specialist items which may otherwise be difficult to acquire, such as binders and packers for nonbinary and trans masculine people. This may be available through friends and family members, but often comes with additional baggage; the shame of asking family to help with highly personal circumstances which is absent online. Normalising difference can be deeply affirming while at the same time reflecting what Namaste (2000) describes as the banality of trans life, the unremarkable tasks, conversations and interactions of the everyday. Twitter users describe their joy as they gain access to a binder for the first time:

"I won a giveaway for a chest binder and I literally am so happy! This will be my first official binder as well. This is going to be so helpful and life changing for me."
"I just bought my first binder! I can finally afford it! In 10-20 days it should be here, and I should be able to get a flat chest! Or at least as flat as possible before top surgery! I'm excited!"

Wearing a binder and the trans joy this inspires speaks to the ways in which spatial practices in private can create a sense of safety in expressing a culturally devalued trans identity. The binder is a specific item which allows the affirmation of one's transness, providing an embodied space in which people can "tangibly represent a [in

this case, trans] consumer identity while protecting it" (Maciel & Wallendorf 2021, 320). A binder is virtually invisible to those around the trans person, so they can feel secure in the joy of the experience wearing it in public and private.

Here it is also important to note the intersection between gender diversity, social class and poverty, where items may be out of reach because of financial circumstances. Through Twitter and Tumblr, those who no longer need things which are necessary for another's gender affirmation are able to share and pass on not only tips and experiences, but also physical items for others' benefit. This community support has been even more important during the COVID-19 global pandemic; while for some it has created more opportunity to present an authentic self ("When the world reopens I wonder who will recognize me", Twitter user), for others it has mean a return to difficult family home lives and circumstances ("I did not have enough money to survive so I returned to my parent's house in west Delhi. But now I am going through mental trauma because my parents and siblings pass comments and taunts on my gender choice the whole day. I feel suffocated").

The power of platforms like Twitter, despite the challenges of eloquent and clear expression in 280 characters, comes in the ability to connect across spatial and temporal boundaries - creating connections in spite of pandemic lockdowns. The sharing of stories and experiences provides some catharsis in knowing you are not alone. The power of hashtags, such as #transisbeautiful, #TransRightsAreHumanRights, #StepUpForTransKids, and #transpower, is in the creation of threads and groups that connect through a shared experience or feeling,

finding likeminded individuals who are supportive of one another. These stories can then be read and shared by others outside the community, which humanises the variety of trans lives.

The following screenshots show some of the joy and humour which can be seen on social media when searching for trans-related hashtags like those mentioned above; alongside many stories of hardship, challenges and adversity, there are moments which remind the reader of the person behind the screen, the human simply living their life (often aware of its potential for absurdity).

I find dressing the way I want to at the gym is empowering AF.
#transgender #girlslikeus #TransIsBeautiful

Figure 7: Twitter screenshot

But my gender is more than 10MB ^^;
#nonbinary #enby #genderqueer #LGBTQIA+

Gender ○ Male
○ Female
○ Custom Upload custom gender (max 10MB)

○ 1   ↻ 21   ♡ 78   ⬆

Figure 8: Twitter screenshot

This humanisation is politically important in an increasingly hostile cisnormative media culture; as Levy (2006) notes, stories create social memory, linking individuals through sharing histories and evoking emotions to help us conceptualise our relation to and place in the universe. Without these social links and feelings, marginalisation,

vulnerability and isolation may become overwhelming, as reflected in the stark statistics on suicide amongst LGBTQ+ people.

Although there is a connective richness in hashtags which allows communities to find each other, this visibility also allows for toxic and abusive users to target vulnerable people online. Thus, trans-related hashtags can become a threatening context where hateful, abusive comments can very rapidly proliferate and overtake the original intention of affirming and supporting the marginalised. Anonymity online can often bolster confidence in expressing views which would in other contexts would remain more covert, so that (sometimes virtually untraceable) online transphobia becomes more explicit (McInroy and Craig, 2015). Political writer Katelyn Burns agrees: "The internet, and trans visibility at large, has devolved into a double-edged sword for the trans community."

The ways in which trans people respond to this consistent environment of distress may vary significantly depending on the personal cultural, psychological, financial and other resources available to each individual. Responses can be both individual and collective, where trans people come together as a community. Individual coping mechanisms or strategies may include adaptations or even avoidance of certain consumption contexts and interactions. However in this study, empowerment and advocacy for change emerged as important ways in which trans consumers respond to vulnerabilities and distress.

6.5 Consumer rebellion

A form of consumer response to stigma and/or vulnerability that emerged strongly in this research is that of rebellion. A strategy of "rebelling" (Hill and Sharma 2020, 561) to unsettle and impair the dominant norms in a social environment can be empowering. Emma remarks that others may have difficulty accepting her, but she sees it as their problem to deal with, so she is unapologetic about being herself:

"I'm going to be noticed even if I'm hiding in the corner and trying to shrink away. So okay, if I'm going to be noticed, I will walk into the room now. Hello!"

Emma is aware that her simply being trans may attract considerable notice in public, but instead of attempting to more closely fit in, she embraces the fact that she sometimes stands out. She is rebelling against social norms which dictate the proper conduct in these circumstances (blending in, not calling attention to her transness), responding with her positive and outgoing personality, and leading the interaction in a forthright way. To a certain extent, Emma's rebellion here is at odds with her reluctance to stand out through makeup discussed earlier. This indicates how rebelling may create tensions for the individual as they struggle with contradictions in socialisations and dispositions, what Mouzelis (2007, 124) refers to as "intra-habitus conflicts". These tensions between socialisation which compels conformity, and disposition which seeks authenticity, creates incongruence that in turn, encourages trans individuals to develop a deeper reflexivity. Author Ugla Stefanía Kristjönudóttir Jónsdóttir (also known as Owl) hints at this deeper reflexivity when discussing marketing campaigns such as the collaboration between Starbucks and trans youth

charity Mermaids:

"And while I don't believe in 'ethical consumption' when we live in such a capitalist society, campaigns like this allow us to use the broken system to our advantage."

For Owl, supporting such a campaign means buying from a company whose reputation within trans circles has become tarnished due to stories of how trans employees have been treated (with accusations of rife misgendering and micro aggressions, through to refusal of leave for urgent healthcare related to being trans). However, the "broken system" of capitalism is enabling a rebellion for the person at the centre of the campaign, a young trans person who is repeatedly deadnamed in various parts of their life, until they go for a coffee at Starbucks. The use of their chosen name on the coffee cup is a visible symbol of their rebellion, where in the majority of social interactions their transness is ignored. In their blog, Owl also explains how the use of their chosen name felt for them: "That's why this is about more than just a name. It's a recognition that people accept you, care about you and see you for who you really are."

However, participants also expressed some cynicism at brands and companies which attempted to leverage Pride or trans-supportive rhetoric, citing their suspicions of such actions being based less in affirming a marginalised community, and more about profits and the potential of a lucrative LGBTQ+ market. Cassia says:

"I do see more LGBT focused brands. They're doing bits and pieces here and there. And I think I'm seeing more and more unfortunately... Sex toys and everything, clothing, and you are just dealing with sexuality... Finding a lot of that sort of stuff is still fetish-y!"

Cassia remarks that when she began searching for brands and companies using transgender and trans search words when she was 17, a number of results came from sex toy and fetish clothing companies. Although she has seen this decrease, she still feels there is an association with fetish and taboo practices when brands look to support trans causes or create products and services targeted to the needs of trans consumers. Sal mentions Pride month and feels that "actions speak better than a rainbow logo":

"There's the illusion of more support for the LGBT community, especially in pride month, but actions speak better than a rainbow logo and promotional words stuck on social media. There is definitely still that maddening belief in many people that because we are more exposed to LGBT stuff that we are somehow trying to condition the cis kids into being LGBT, as though such a thing is possible."

Sal alludes to another association here, where being LGBTQ+ is represented almost as a contagion that can be passed between and on to people. They find this "maddening" and mention feeling cautious of buying rainbow-themed items, perhaps because they are unsure of the beliefs or views of the brand or seller. Alex has a similar outlook on

"queer friendly" outlets:

"If I see some sort of queer friendly… it doesn't mean a great deal to me seeing like queer or LGBT in the shop window… it is conflicting to me. When you're trying to be trans inclusive, organisations automatically can be awful.

I'm really jaded! I walk around and check are their major products really gendered? I'll look for the options. What are the three genders… it's like a like dragons, princesses and aliens or something. I see the importance of playing with gender… Aliens are some strange creatures!"

Alex may be suspicious of companies and brands which look to use Pride or LGBTQ+ messaging but fail to act on this appropriately, as evidenced by their treatment of trans employees for example. However, they also recognise opportunities in these circumstances, where they can utilise products or services for rebellion. I mention this in a fieldnote where I had been searching on Tumblr and Twitter, and noted that trans and nonbinary people were sometimes posting selfies which took high or fast fashion items, and combined them with other gendered items to create new 'queer' fashions. This was also the case with makeup:

"#IAmNonbinary includes some fabulous individuals who can use makeup to highlight different features and totally change their face! I notice one person in particular, they are using feminine products and typically female looks and being very creative. Eye makeup and a strong lip with a beard and masculine jaw – juxtaposition! (Fieldnote_150320)

243

Taking the original product and applying it differently, or styling clothing in ways which contradict gender norms are some of the ways people like Alex can openly subvert what they can see as hollow inclusivity of transness. Rebelling may also sometimes be less outwardly visible, for example when talking about clothing, Lucas mentions that he owns over 65 pairs of colourful boxers. When living at home, his mother removed any typically male undergarments from his wardrobe, and now he rebels by owning a collection which cannot be seen outwardly but makes him feel happy and confident. Social media can also open up avenues for rebelling, where trans people can easily experiment and imagine their authentic selves freed from constraints. Debi likes Pinterest in particular for this reason, as she can collect images of dresses, shoes and make-up looks for herself in virtual space. For Mars, experimenting with make-up is a form of rebelling as he does not differentiate between "makeup for boys and makeup for girls, it's just makeup… I don't try to be necessarily masculine but it's still kind of annoying to deal with [makeup being perceived] feminine."

Similarly, Sal talks about using scent to express his masculinity and his realisation that "gender isn't fixated on a piece of cloth or the colours or things you like." These invisible acts of rebellion might be considered as attempts to incorporate self-care practices into daily life (Hutton 2016) that foster empowerment in face of persistent adversity. Rebelling in the ways discussed here illustrates the importance of reflexivity in theorising power. Awareness of their marginalised status fails to prevent Emma and others from challenging the dominant gender norms, even if sometimes the rebellion

244

is invisible. Whilst these invisible acts of rebellion are empowering for participants, they do little to change the status quo. Their invisibility means they have little impact on ingrained dominant gender norms.

To engage in more outwardly visible acts of rebellion requires resources - psychological characteristics, social capital to publicise efforts to rebel, for example - that may not be easily accessed or consistently available, once again reinforcing the challenge of drawing attention to the plurality of genders. For Carrie, being lead singer in a metal band feels empowering; as a trans woman, she didn't expect to be taken seriously as a singer but her trans status has not prevented her from pursuing music. Indeed, it has been a source of inspiration for her as she explains that she has written songs with her fellow band members reflecting her feelings on her transness:

"I'm not quiet, I'm not cute. I don't do what I'm supposed to, I take up too much space. I don't know my place, I could never be your girl."

Carrie's lyrics describe how she feels as a trans woman; she fails to live up to and actively rebels against feminine stereotypes of submissiveness ("I'm not quiet, I don't do what I'm supposed to"). The small personal gains that Carrie achieves from taking up "too much space" reflect ways in which ordinary actions in everyday life can be instilled with an element of activism, to "make incremental claims of value in social relations" (Maciel and Wallendorf 2021, 327). In singing these lyrics, Carrie is making clear that being a trans woman does not devalue her identity in her own eyes, as she could never fit the ideal stereotype anyway ("I could never be your girl"). The notion

of being unapologetic about fitting into social norms of gender is carried forward by this Tumblr user too:

"Fuck it. Make cis people uncomfortable.

Dress however you want, grow out your hair if you want to. Cut it, really badly, in your best friend's dorm. Use those pronouns. Be unashamedly yourself to the best of your ability. Make them question everything they ever knew about gender without ever giving a shit about their opinions.

Put yourself first."

This post seeks to challenge norms and defy stereotypes in urging others to "make cis people uncomfortable", turning the cultural devaluation of trans identity back on itself. Maciel and Wallendorf (2021, 324) theorise that "spatial incursion consists of temporarily taking a consumer identity into a public space where it is not typically found in order to claim favourable meanings for it". This Tumblr post takes this notion of spatial incursion and adds a rebellious angle; not only can trans people "be unashamedly yourself", but this disregard for gender norms can then be turned onto cis people's perception of gender too, all the while centring the trans person's individuality and wellbeing. This rebellion incites a questioning of gender norms to flip typical power dynamics of cisheteronormative dominance on its head, countering negative stereotypes and showing how the marginalised can make their own meanings of devalued identities.

Finding community - sources of knowledge and experience, shared meanings, and storytelling - can be an incredible benefit for marginalised trans people. A sense of belonging and not being alone can create ways to enact collective rebellion through advocacy and organising with others. Trans Day of Remembrance (#TDoR) on 20 November represents a collective expression of grief for those trans people who have been lost, all too often due to brutality, addiction and suicide. While for some it is a chance to mourn, others feel anger and frustration, using the hashtag to draw attention to intersections within the community who suffer disproportionately, such as Black trans women. This highlights inequalities within inequalities, making visible the daily struggles and talking about experiences at the intersections of race, class, income and other identities. In this way, rebellion can mean recovering power, pushing back against exploitation and domination in a social hierarchy which aims at "keeping people down" (Link and Phelan 2014, 25). The marginalised can thus "blunt" the stigma of their transness (or their race, class, income etc.) as there is now power held by the target of stigma (Mirabito et al, 2016).

"When I joined a server online that was initially for an entirely separate subject I became close friends with a bunch of people who just so happened to be part of the LGBT community, although we had joined over the banner of let's abandon society and go live in the woods as a joke at the time. It was them that I went to after a while to talk about what I was experiencing."

"Most of my trans non binary friends are actually younger and they are very, very gender affirming. They're very sure of who they are. I think that the biggest thing I've got from social media is being able to keep in touch with all my friends from university and the

trans and nonbinary group while lockdown's been on. Because I've missed that. I've missed them terribly. There are people that who I absolutely adore and want to get to know better and they want to get to know me better."

These quotes from Sal and Paula show that community can be found even in unlikely places; although Sal was not specifically searching for other trans people to talk to about his experiences, he found that he was able to gain support and learn more about being trans through friends made online. The social nature of the forum helped to foster connection between Sal and his friends who simply happened to have a shared interest. For Paula, the experience of being at university and having access to a dedicated trans and nonbinary group has been a wonderful source of support. Although they are older than most of the group members, they have been embraced as part of the group and suffered when this face-to-face interaction was prevented due to COVID-19 lockdowns. Instead, they have been able to find their friends on social media unrelated to either university or transness, and have thus found connections despite the challenges of the pandemic. The adaption of the unrelated forum to supporting a sense of community among diverse people may be the most subtle form of rebellion possible.

6.7 Conclusion

In everyday interactions, trans people attempt to judge the safety and vulnerability involved in participating as their true selves. The tensions in figuring out which spaces may be precarious and which may be safe make navigating consumer space challenging. This chapter has explored trans consumers' access to market spaces such

as physical consumption environments and online spaces. The dominance of cisheteronormativity in in retail spaces creates challenges for trans people navigating routine purchases of clothing and other products to express their gender identity such as make-up. As most of these physical spaces are divided along binary male/female lines, consumers transitioning across genders may face difficulty in shopping for items in the 'wrong' part of the store; participants mention being challenged by cisgender staff and other consumers on being in a space incongruent with how their gender is perceived.

This emphasises our reliance on others' perceptions of us; to be read as the 'correct' gender, many trans people alter their appearance in public interactions - described as their ability to 'shapeshift' depending on the circumstances in order to remain safe. The boundary-keeping of gender norms has also been explored in terms of online communities and the gatekeeping of certain identities. Even in spaces which should ostensibly be completely safe, trans people face marginalisation. Casey's experience of being challenged in the bathroom of an LGBTQ+ club shows how divisions within the LGBTQ+ community impact on trans safety.

Online spaces offer opportunities to play with gender expressions in safety, as described by Debi's use of Pinterest and others' explorations through games such as Animal Crossing. Although the internet enables connections across geographical (and temporal) boundaries for the sharing of trans stories, this visibility is sometimes a source of vulnerability as transphobic rhetoric, harassment and abuse remain commonplace on platforms such as Twitter. Trans consumers' however do hold some

power which they can direct to lightening some of the burden of vulnerabilities and risks to safety. These rebellions can be subtle or invisible, taking place just for the person themselves, through clothing, appearance, or even just the use of a chosen name instead of a deadname. Collective rebellion through community organisation, activism and moments such as TDoR can illuminate and make visible inequalities which are a source of anger, frustration and further distress, with the goal of retaking power for the marginalised.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This thesis contributes to two main areas of marketing literature. The study addresses a literature gap in consumer research through examining vulnerability in the context of trans consumers. The objectives of the research set out in Chapter One were:

Objective 1: to understand how gender diverse consumers navigate marketplaces

Objective 2: to understand how sociocultural, institutional, and individual factors may shape experiences of marketplace stigma and vulnerability

Objective 3: to explore how gender diverse consumers respond to consumer vulnerability

There is a notable lack of research in marketing on gender diversity, where other disciplines like social geography and sociology have undertaken much more in-depth work. Insights from queer and transgender theorising help inform and shape the theoretical contributions of the thesis, which are outlined below.

The first contribution of this thesis is a conceptual model of distress which brings together stigma, symbolic violence and consumer vulnerability to highlight the overlaps and intersections between these concepts. The second contribution of this thesis builds on McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg's (2017) work with trans and nonbinary participants by further exploring these consumers' experiences, and deepening our understanding of consumer vulnerability online through netnography as well as in-depth interviews. The final contribution of this thesis is to highlight the

voices, lives and experiences of an underrepresented consumer population in marketing research.

This chapter will discuss these contributions in more depth, as well as managerial and policy implications of the findings, before moving on to examine areas of future research.

7.2 Contribution One: A model of marketplace distress

This research begins to address the notion of persistent social marginalisation, specifically by engaging with a multiply marginalised trans community and building on prior work which addresses how transgender consumers may experience vulnerability. Specifically, this contribution relates to research objective two in examining the sociocultural, institutional, and individual factors may shape experiences of stigma and vulnerability in the marketplace. In doing so, the ways in which performances of gender may also be influenced by these factors can be seen, and the interconnectedness and messiness of consumer gender identity projects can be highlighted.

Marketplace distress can take different forms, as discussed in Chapters Five and Six. In this thesis, marketplace distress is characterised by undercurrents of negative feelings like sorrow, worry and anguish, which imbue marketplace interactions with sensations of unease and stress. The model below shows a visual conceptualisation of distress in consumer vulnerability experiences, taking into consideration how stigma and

vulnerability overlap and intersect, and bringing together the key elements which emerged from the findings of this research.
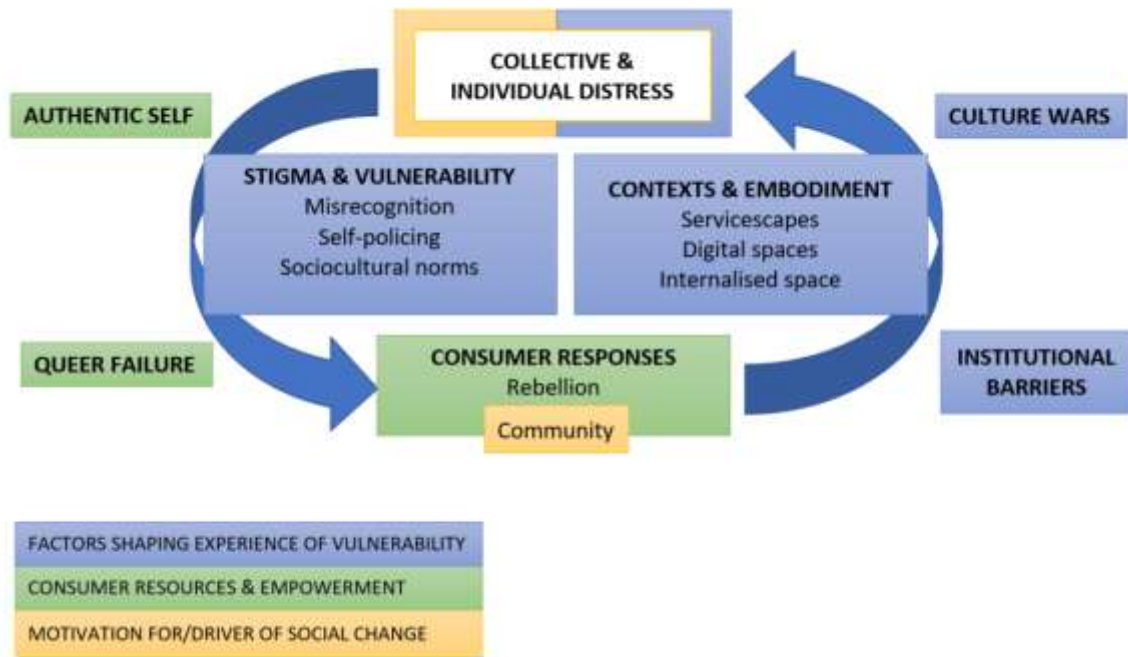

Figure 9: Conceptual model of marketplace distress

The colour coding in the model refers to different factors and forces that can be highlighted in experiences of distress. The blue boxes represent those more negative forces such as institutional barriers (which includes the difficult politics of being trans, discussed in more depth later in this chapter). These forces make up part of the environment in which vulnerability, stigma and contexts come together in creating a feeling of distress. The green and yellow boxes in the model represent responses to vulnerability, looking at empowerment and social change on behalf of marginalised social groups.

The model devised here brings together different elements that have previously been part of broader conceptualisations of vulnerability and focuses more closely on the role of systemic and emotional factors. This study builds on McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg's (2017) work to deepen our understanding of consumer responses to vulnerability by exploring how distress can fuel further instances and experiences of the same. Distress can occur across different spaces as trans people must navigate through an often hostile environment in which even LGBTQ+ space is not guaranteed to be safe for them. In terms of the physical and digital worlds, the reinforcement of the gender binary is highly visible through media and advertising. However, as the findings in Chapters Five and Six illustrate, there are factors which can trigger distress and vulnerability which are so deeply embedded that they become hidden or invisible.

The following sections of this chapter explore the main elements of the model in more detail.

7.2.1 The stigma of trans - self-policing and symbolic violence

Stigma, described as marginalisation of people and social groups on the basis of personal attributes different from dominant values (Goffman, 1990), and vulnerability, defined as "a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products" (Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg 2005, 134), are woven together here. Previous research has powerfully shown both concepts at work in the lives of marginalised consumers, but the overlaps and connections between them has gone unremarked upon. By bringing them together, this model adds to our understanding of both stigma and vulnerability,

and the complex and intricate intersections of marginalisation experienced by consumers.

In Chapter Five, the concept of self-policing was introduced to show the ways in which trans people are highly aware of how their gender expression is perceived by others. Because of this, they often self-police and manage their physical appearance, mannerisms and speech patterns to conform to the gender they expect others to view them as, rather than as their authentic trans self. This puts pressure on their internal sense of self and thus can shape how they navigate social interactions, as well as space.

For trans people, passing and shapeshifting may become necessary in both physical and digital spaces for safety, and being outed as trans in either space can be an enormously distressing experience. The internalisation of gender norms and rejection of a self which is trans can lead to long periods in the closet, living as a gender which does not reflect who they truly are. In Chapter Six, Paula speaks eloquently about this type of distress, when they talk about having been in a box and hearing anti-trans rhetoric which was the final nail in the coffin. This links further to the culture wars in media and the hostile environment which is created by such rhetoric, again shaping how trans consumers may experience vulnerability.

Further, we can see how contexts, structural, cultural and political factors, and responses are linked in an iterative cycle of stigma and vulnerability. Consumer contexts can be sites of both the creation and repudiation of stigma and vulnerability; resistance to norms and acknowledgement of politicised identities can be a source of

symbolic power, drawing on cultural and social resources to take part in trans activism, for instance. The constraints of institutional barriers are often shaped by the prevailing political thinking of the time, as can be seen in the winds fuelling the stigma turbine (Mirabito et al., 2016). In areas such as healthcare and education, these barriers cannot necessarily be overcome. Long waiting lists for gender identity clinics, further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic mean that trans people have to wait at least 2 years before taking the first step to being recognised as their authentically gendered self. If transition starts earlier in life, as with many trans youth, the wait for medical intervention can be even longer as surgical and hormonal treatments are only available to adults aged 18 and over. Generally speaking, transition in childhood is focused on social aspects such as changing name, using new pronouns and wearing different, with possible prescription of puberty blockers which delay the onset of puberty to help young people have time to explore their gender. The lengthy waiting times to access healthcare can compound the mental health crisis in which we see greater instances of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and self-harm in the trans community (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Maguen and Shipherd, 2010; Erickson-Schroth, 2014). However the distress of encountering them can produce a sense of injustice and motivate us towards combatting transphobia online through openly and actively supporting trans people, advocating for trans rights through signing and sharing petitions, and lobbying MPs and governing bodies.

These actions can help to reveal hidden processes of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1989; 2003), stereotypes and stigmatisation by drawing attention to the ways in which misrecognition and the power of heteronormativity impact on gender diverse lives.

The model also links stigma and vulnerability distress; as explored in the findings, trans people may experience 'courtesy stigma' in regards to family, where the stigma of being trans extends beyond the trans individual to the people associated with and around them. The impact of stigma by association with the trans person can highlight the need for strong support systems not only for the trans person themselves, but also for those in close relationships with them (DiBennardo and Saguy, 2018; Lewis, Baretto and Doyle, 2022). Next, this section will look at how model brings together the different contexts in which vulnerability can be experienced, more fully addressing online and offline spaces in conjunction with vulnerability as felt, embodied, and internalised by individuals. It is to embodiment and space that this chapter now turns.

7.2.2 The spaces of trans – contexts and embodiment

Also in Chapter Five, the contexts and embodiment of trans experiences of vulnerability were outlined. The link between servicescapes, digital spaces and internalised spaces is through the body; one cannot experience oneself without reference to one's physical presence in the world. The body is sometimes overlooked as a site or space of vulnerability but in terms of trans consumer lives, it is integral to the feelings, emotions and experiences of consumption. Navigating social spaces often involves the careful selection of gendered market objects that enable trans consumers to present a gender identity that is socially acceptable to others but that also encompasses (sometimes hidden) elements that met their own preferred gender identity. Drawing on Cheded and Liu (2022, 80), this is indicative of that "duality of the normative subjectivities and the abject all inhabiting the same body." Seregina (2019) also draws on the notion of duality in terms of performing the other and

performing the everyday self, in her exploration of LARP (live-action role-play) and the ways in which consumers create, work on, and grow their characters.

This duality can also play out in broader contexts where trans bodies are under discussion, particularly when they may be leverage in the arena of politics. This is covered in more depth in the next section on sociocultural norms and culture wars, but it is also important in considering marketplace spaces. Consumers have long used everyday marketplace and consumption practices where there are few political resources available to them for socioeconomic progress, thus moving their identity work towards identity politics (Thompson, 2014). The politics of being trans seem unavoidable, despite the community's insistence on simply wanting to live their lives. As mentioned earlier, the everyday banality of life does not tend to be imbued with politics for the cisgender majority, but for a trans person, their very existence is often the subject of political discussion.

The findings of this study add to our understanding of politicised consumer identity projects through theorising marketplace distress as a fuelling contextual factor for individual consumers as well as collectively at a community level. Maciel and Wallendorf (2021, 319) discuss politicised identity projects in terms of spatial repurposing, where consumers "meet with peers and temporarily reorient servicescapes into sites of support" for their culturally devalued identity projects; for trans consumers, online spaces are often reoriented not only to provide support to each other as peers but also to resist and defy the distress of marginalisation. Discussions on platforms like Twitter and Tumblr of navigating everyday consumption

situations, such as going for coffee or shopping for groceries, take on additional political meaning for trans people who are able to safely go about their day presenting as their authentic self. The notion of an authentic self plays sometimes divisive role in narratives about trans lives; for some, it is a vital goal to be able to reflect in the physical body what the internal sense of gender feels like. Living authentically or living your truth can be seen as central to being truly trans, but this comes with its own problematic assumptions. First, that in order to be trans, one must experience a form of gender dysphoria rooted in the body, and must be seeking medical or surgical intervention to correct this. Without such physical changes, one cannot be trans. This narrow view of trans presents some difficulties when considering gender diversity beyond moving from one binary gender to another; what if hormones or surgery are not wanted or not possible due to other medical complications? What if there is no way to be fully and properly gendered. In Chapter Five, Georgie's agender identity means that they can never really undergo transition, as they will be in a permanent limbo of desiring a bodily flexibility that simply cannot exist. However, they are still trans. Blogger Angus Grieve-Smith feels no real connection to an authentic version of themselves. They are still trans.

Much debate and discussion can be found online about what it means to be authentically trans. What seems to connect many of the differing viewpoints and perspectives from trans people however is a desire to be able to define their own borders and bodies, without interference from the dominant cisgender majority (particularly those in positions of medical power). The reorientation of online space for affirmation and support does not preclude further distress in the forms of online

harassment and transphobia, but through online communities, trans people can carve themselves a spatial niche, a form of securing territory away from assorted interferences (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2021). Next, this chapter addresses sociocultural factors and culture wars as territories of marketplace distress and trauma in trans people's lives.

7.2.3 The trauma of trans – sociocultural norms and culture wars

Drawing on sociocultural factors which shape the experiences of vulnerability, the feeling of distress can be influenced by the media environment, including in the context of social media, in which the consumer lives. Specifically referencing the ongoing culture wars in the UK and US, trans participants note the double-edged sword of increased visibility; although there may be more representation of trans lives in media like TV and movies, there is also a higher instance of news media scrutiny which reflects the political landscape and its recent inclinations towards more right-wing views. This is especially evident in online discussions of gender identity, where same-sex spaces and women's rights have turned into battlegrounds in which trans women in particular have had to argue with a minority of vocal 'gender-critical feminists'. Access to public spaces like toilets has become a point of contention online, with trans people's lived experiences of being questioned about the right to be there often featuring in discussions. In the findings, it can be seen that trans men's experiences in particular are generally ignored and further marginalised, contributing to a further feeling of distress in failing to be heard and seen.

Here, a parallel could be drawn between the concepts of distress and trauma. Trauma as a word has largely retained its medical and psychological meanings as a wound, either physical or within the psyche, on an individual level. From a sociological perspective, trauma can also be applied collectively, "where the 'wound' is located at the level of the group" (Woods 2019, 261). Eyerman (2013, 41) further defines trauma in cultural sociology as "the impact of shocking occurrences which profoundly affect an individual's life". In marketing and consumer contexts, Bennett et al. (2016) discuss cultural trauma through marketplace omission/commission, noting that "People almost always fight against cultural trauma, as they begin to recognise collective trauma as an authentic threat to the continuation of their society" (ibid, 282). Note the use here of the word 'authentic'; there seem to be important linkages across different experiences and dimensions of identity which ask for the 'real' in us as humans.

This is where trauma and distress begin to diverge; there is a collective decision in viewing experiences and events as traumatising, which can then lead onto collective action to address the roots of the cultural trauma. Although distress also can be experienced collectively, the threads of action are much more disparate and scattered. Other social movements around inequalities and societal problems like racism, such as Black Lives Matter, have a cohesive identity and motif behind which community organising and activism can be gathered. The trans community, although working together to achieve similar goals of recognition, combatting stigma, and countering bigotry and violence, has no similar asset. Community in this sense is somewhat looser, so that activism is widespread amongst like-minded individuals who collectively share similar aims for social change but work across and between

intersections of transness. Considering the importance placed on recognising and celebrating the rich variety of being trans, this is perhaps not surprising, and does not make progress for trans rights any less valid or significant. Indeed, the dispersion of trans activism could also mean that smaller groups within geographical areas benefit from localised action, resources and knowledge which can then be shared with a broader community to encourage social change at a grassroots level. Localised changes may also be more meaningful than a vaguer, sweeping call for equality and rights which may often fail to make inroads against so deeply embedded cisheteronormativity.

McCormack (2020) suggests that cultural trauma often develops a master narrative which has to say something about the pain, trauma victims, and the responsibility and relationships with a wider audience. Distress has no such overarching narrative; trans people's collective distress is expressed through shared stories and experiences which seem not to combine and merge, instead remaining as individual narratives of shared restrictions and hardships. So while demographic factors like race, class, and gender "place[s] consumers in distinct institutional niches with varying degrees of privilege and constraint" (Bennett et al. 2016, 282) creating distress and trauma, the conceptual convergence between the two is more limited.

The recognition of events as traumatising are an important factor; like symbolic violence, distress is often misrecognised due to dominant norms, particularly in terms of gender. Gender norms are so deeply embedded in our sociocultural environment that it becomes hugely difficult to appropriately attribute distress to the unseen power

dynamics at play. An individual may be able to pinpoint that they are feeling distress, but it may not necessarily be qualified as a wider set of events which could be positioned as a trigger for experiencing emotion. Additionally, as Hutton (2015, 1699) explains, "relatively little is known about how consumers who experience persistent social marginalisation based on intersecting issues such as gender, poverty, race or disability, articulate consumption-related strain as it relates to their lives". There is a shift here from the notion of stress to distress; in her discussion of consumer stress, Hutton (2015, 1696) notes that "stress is conceptualised as events and conditions that cause major change with which an individual must cope." Marketplace distress in this thesis though does not necessarily refer to an event or condition of major change; the realisation and recognition of a trans identity may have come many years prior and may not be the direct trigger of distress. Rather, the distress may come from or feel as if it is *part of being trans*, if transness is at all identified as a distress trigger. For participants like Lucas, Mars, Paula and Valentine, distress came from the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Psychologists such as Smail (1993) and Smith (2022) have written about the importance of how we experience the world around us in contributing to psychological distress; interestingly, both authors note that the individualistic model of locating the distress within the individual then leads on to an investigation to find medical solutions for that distress, discounting the wider context in which it occurs.

Further, as Hutton (2015) also powerfully explains, stress in contexts of poverty and gender can create pressure to constantly be searching the marketplace for resources that can be stretched. Persistently seeking out bargains or deals on a daily basis in

order to make a little go further is its own significant stress on low-income consumers, especially in light of the recent cost of living crisis, but could be different in nature than the distress specific to gender diversity. Product scarcity may be a shared or similar experience, but the stress of paying bills and buying food is not the same as the distress of failing to fit into gender norms. This is not to say that trans people cannot experience poverty, or that low-income consumers are not trans; there is definite overlap between the social factors of poverty and gender diversity. However, there are different but intersecting pressures at work here, and for the purposes of a doctoral thesis, marginalisation and distress is the principal focus.

7.2.4 The rebellion and community of trans – empowerment and social change

Trans rebellion against gender norms and a cisheteronormative environment can be manifested online, through sharing stories and resources with those who have difficulty accessing specific products to help express their transness. Rebellion can be forthright in community activism, both online and offline, where trans people advocate for their rights through powerful community and individual narratives which show the richness and mundanity of trans lives. This kind of activism does require resources which may not always be available, such as social and psychological capital to put oneself in the public eye, so some rebellions are much more subtle. In Chapter Six, Mars talks about his colourful underwear and how this is one way for him to express his masculinity just for himself. Invisible rebellions like this can be equally as empowering. Indeed, the notion of queer failure which is expanded on later in this chapter is a rebellion against cisheteronormativity; one's mere existence as a trans person rebels against dominant norms which mandate binary gender and

reproduction, creating a family with a male and female parent, as the ultimate goal of human existence.

Feelings of collective and individual distress can both shape an experience of vulnerability and become an empowering force fuelling social change. In terms of the power of large corporations and the inequalities created, it is possible to see how distress can be necessary to push for social change. In feeling vulnerable, alone, angry, worried, we are motivated to rebel, to show our resilience, to challenge power. This is closely linked to the responses to consumer vulnerability discussed in Chapters Five and Six, illuminating the ways in which trans consumers push back against dominant social and gender norms, asserting their diverse identities despite facing significant barriers such as transphobia, symbolic violence, and stigmatisation. Drawing attention to the interrelationships between stigma and vulnerability through conceptualising distress, the model attempts to address what can go "unnoticed within social justice contexts" (Hutton and Heath 2020, 2699), in particular the disproportionate distribution of power. Centring the emotions of vulnerability and the voices of participants, this thesis aims to avoid creating a research process which can "reinforce power asymmetries, silence participants and communities and ultimately lead to inaction" (ibid). This could be a position of disempowerment, where participants' stories and experiences are carelessly extracted for research purposes with little regard for the impact of research on the individuals and communities.

The creation and sense of community is itself a response to vulnerability and stigma, whereby consumers come together with alternative consumption practices such as

frequenting charity shops rather than retail stores, swapping and sharing specific items which help express gender such as binders. Charity shops often create an inclusive environment which links the work of that particular charity to wider social issues, for example creating specific displays for Pride. Baker and Mason (2012, 549) explain that "community constitutes a set of relational, rather than simply geographical, connections. People who share the same set of pressures (e.g., limited access to goods and services) and are impacted by the same or similar trigger events may share the experience of vulnerability". Although the pressures and trigger events may be similar for trans people, the experiences of vulnerability can also be hugely varied in light of the diverse ways in which it is possible to be trans. This is important to emphasise; one of the key elements of this research was to try to reflect at least a fraction of the diversity of the trans community without establishing a master narrative that does not in fact exist. A further aim was to help bring to the fore both similarities and differences in lived experiences of those under the trans umbrella.

Trying to avoid even referring to the 'trans community' as a monolith is challenging; the relational connections that Baker and Mason (2012) mention may sometimes be tenuous, and sharing a label as broad and varied as "trans" does not mean uncritically thinking about it (Raun, 2016). Being part of a 'community' with other marginalised trans and LGBTQ+ people does not automatically mean safety, as stigma may also be perpetuated amongst members of the community through policing the borders of transness. This refers back to the power dynamics of dominant social gender norms; for some, the 'right' way to be trans is to medically and/or surgically alter the body, so without the use of hormone therapy and committing to procedures like vaginoplasty

and phalloplasty, one cannot be trans. This view of trans requires a definitive

destination on a journey from one side to the other, reinforcing binary gender

structures. As participants talked about at the very beginning of the interviews, and as

may be viewed on social media, gender has many rich and varied meanings for all

kinds of trans and queer identities.

7.2.5 Summarising marketplace distress

This research provides a fresh insight into experiences of consumer vulnerability,

specifically creating a conceptual model of how distress is felt and the ways in which it

contributes to these experiences. Addressing research objective two, the model

incorporates the sociocultural, institutional, and individual factors shaping

experiences of vulnerability and stigma. McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017)

theorise consumer vulnerability to be an iterative cycle, where responses to

vulnerability can create further instances of vulnerability. This can also be seen in the

cyclical arrows of the model, showing how factors shaping the experience of

vulnerability and stigma then feed into consumer responses. Building on McKeage,

Crosby and Rittenburg's work, there are different kinds of response which the authors

discuss as passive or active, and which can overlap with macro responses. This model

highlights the overlap in how vulnerability is responded to at an individual and

collective level. However, it also goes further in also highlighting the iterative nature

of responses to vulnerability, as well as the feedback loop of vulnerability itself.

McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017) talk about their use of the word "resolve" in

their model, rather than "remediate" as used in Pavia and Mason's (2014) discussion of

the dimensions of vulnerability. In the 2017 paper, the authors discuss how remediate can indicate a status to which may not be desirable to return. Vulnerability is neither seen as resolved or remediated in this marketplace distress model, as it is constantly feeding into and fuelling consumer experiences, and serving as a driver for social change. In this conceptualisation, it is feelings of empowerment in spite of vulnerability which can be a key force in marginalised consumer lives. This almost flips our understanding of vulnerability on its head by emphasising positive aspects of experiences; while acknowledging that inequalities and barriers still remain and may be challenging to dislodge, there is a spark of hope, rebellion, and enfranchisement to be found in the negatives. This thesis therefore contributes to the literature on consumer vulnerability by considering responses more deeply, highlighting the empowerment (in green and yellow on the model) consumers can feel as part of distress, both at an individual level and a collective level as a wider community.

7.3 Contribution Two: Queer failure

The second contribution of this thesis is to build on Pirani and Daskaloupou's (2022) work on queer failure. This contribution addresses research objective three; highlighting the ways in which failure can be a source of rebellion and empowerment in trans lives helps to create greater understanding of how trans consumers respond to experiences of consumer vulnerability. Disruption of gender and social norms as well as dominant consumer/capitalist logic can occur through these small, significant actions where power is rebalanced in favour of the marginalised trans community. Whether through community and collective activism, or invisible individual refusals to conform, trans consumer responses to vulnerability can help shape the market

landscape and environment in different ways; individual instances of distress and vulnerability can prompt collective action towards social change as trans people come together and work together to reject cisheteronormativity.

In their Queer Manifesto, the authors discuss queer failure as "acting as political refusal for social control" (ibid, 300), encouraging an uncoupling of failure and unhappiness in embracing the negative, even when it is painful. Queer theory and queer failure also open up narratives of failure beyond a journey towards redemption and to examine the role of systemic failures in marginalising queer lives. The authors (2022, 8) comment that "queer theory can point towards failure as a productive resistance against dominant heteronormative and consumerist logic". The rebellions that are uncovered in this study help to illustrate how trans consumers may find the power to push back in a cultural and marketplace environment that consistently reinforces binary gender.

Coffin et al (2019, 273) suggest that LGBTQ+ consumers' reluctant acceptance of so-called rainbow capitalism is in part due to the "emotional legacy" of homophobia, even when such media and advertising are highly stereotypical. However, a further point of failure can be seen in participants' rejection of negative and stereotypical media portrayals and "rainbow-washing" in advertising. Participants in this research describe their awareness of companies' practices beyond simply changing a logo to rainbow Pride colours during Pride month, especially in terms of how the likes of Starbucks treat their trans employees, and that this means they have a more jaded view of supposedly LGBTQ-supportive marketing. In rejecting the market's oversimplified

view of queer lives, participants' cynicism represents a point of productive

disobedience towards the dominant logic of capitalism. In this way, trans consumers

can regain power from a system which sees them as consistently failing, unlocking

space for experimentation with alternative ways to consume, like sharing and giving

away rather than purchasing anew. This becomes particularly interesting in

considering clothing and the consumption practices seen in Chapters Five and Six.

Mellander and Peterson McIntyre (2021) discuss how men and women may hold onto

items of clothing because of the way it made them feel and the awareness this gave

them of their bodies. In light of this, trans consumers' practice of sharing items may

seem contradictory. However in failing to keep something that may have been

intimately connected to their transition or trans identity, these consumers in fact

strengthen their community by giving others the chance to experience their own

intimate connections. The reciprocity of the community goes beyond physical items

too. In doing so, such consumers 'fail' to adhere to social norms of gender expression

and presentation. The failure of consumers in this sense could then be a sense of

collectivity and resistance to the "capitalist urge to consume" (Pirani and

Daskoloupou, 298). As there is a strong current of supporting peers through what can

be a difficult phase of life. Sharing stories of coming out, describing how a trans body

can feel, and discussing experiences of medical procedures, all become important ways

to integrate across different life stages. The failure of the community to adhere to

strict age boundaries and to embrace intergenerational bonds between trans people

goes against how marketing attempts to segment and neatly box in groups of

consumers based on demographics; no matter what age you are, a trans body is a trans body.

This highlights another important area of consideration that is addressed in the distress model, that of embodiment, and the failures and rebellions of trans bodies. The manipulation of the body to better fit who you are (White, 2014), whether through medical procedures or consumption practices (or both), could represent failure and/or rebellion. McKeage, Crosby and Rittenburg (2017, 82) note, "some characteristics of the body are not amenable to remaking", however as noted in the discussion of Georgie's bodily experiences in Chapter Five, although their body may not look or be entirely the way they want due to their agender identity, this does not stop them playing with gender. In their drag king persona, stereotypical shape and size can be parodied (Butler, 1990) through their failure to conform and the deliberate dismissal of masculine stereotypes in their performance. Misalignment of perceived identity and physical appearance may sometimes be purposeful, embracing the body's potential to subvert and disrupt gender - thus failing and rebelling against cisheteronormativity.

It is also important to note that distress is not a universal experience. For participants like Emma, Cassia, Carrie and Georgie, distress occurs only occasionally or minimally, linked to specific experiences rather than day-to-day generally. This is not to diminish their experiences, but instead to highlight that it is possible to live a trans life safely and happily. There is sometimes a tendency of research with marginalised participants to neglect the joy and comfort of simply living one's life, without constant reminders

of marginalisation. This is what Namaste (2001) speaks of as the banality of trans life: going about daily activities like grocery shopping, taking children to school, visiting friends and family.

7.3.1 Trans/queer and politics: the significance of the everyday

Drawing inspiration from other disciplines such as sociology, gender studies, and cultural studies has opened and widened the data interpretation, connecting and situating consumption within a socio-cultural and socio-political context. Through discussions of media representations, institutional and structural barriers, the complexity and highly political nature of everyday trans existence in current times can be brought to the fore. Queer is political; from a common term of abuse in the 1980s, queer has become a powerful political word with meanings in the sense of community, identity, philosophy, and politics (Kornak, 2015).

Politics and consumption have a troubled history, stemming from mid-20th century assertions that "consumer culture emphasizes acquisitiveness and individualism at the expense of civic-mindedness" (Shah et al. 2007, 7). However, Thompson and Kumar (2021) point out that consumer culture also came to be understood more broadly as an avenue for affecting social change in ways that were unhindered by inflexible and conservative political institutions. Consumer activism such as boycotts and protests are one way in which consumers can wield some political influence, using their buying power for the greater good and effecting change through consumption.

Although the participants in this study indicate some activist choices or actions, they do not go as far as mentioning specific boycotts or protests. Rather, their political influence is often wielded through active decisions to avoid mainstream market offerings, for example by frequenting charity shops. The Tumblr users who take part in swaps and giveaways online to make products like binders available when they no longer use them are able to circumvent capitalism's push for surplus consumption. When Ken talks about buying coffee in Starbucks, they are clear that they only did so on that occasion especially because the purchase supported the charity Mermaids, which helps trans young people and their families. For Ken, they generally avoid global brands and buy from local businesses, but this choice enabled them to visibly support trans youth. The mundane purchase of a coffee became a way to engage in a small political action that had significant personal meaning. In other words, everyday consumption practices become entwined with social responsibility, moral, and political meanings (Chen, 2020), and is the most popular form of political engagement, at least in the US (Lightfoot, 2019). In the UK, political engagement has historically included voting and election-related behaviours, but participation has been expanded in the Internet age to include campaigning, peaceful protest activity like strikes and demonstrations, and online behaviours such as sharing on social media or with contact networks through email (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013). Consumption has yet to be fully investigated as a form of political action or engagement in a British context, it would seem.

Social movements can "dramatically shape public perception and bring major change in social policy" (Patsiaourous 2022, 17), and thus far, marketing research has focused

on consumers' activism towards unethical practices, environmental issues and harmful corporate policies. However, there is an increasing perception of social movements' potential to bring about institutional change (ibid), with the growing awareness of a consumer public around issues of social inequality and social justice. It is here that trans consumer empowerment as a social movement may be seen and reflected in the shared stories and sense of community, recognising difference in trans experiences while still struggling for greater tolerance and acceptance in wider society. The richness of the lived experiences of participants here seems to point to an active, motivated, and engaged group of people who happen to share a more varied view of gender than binary social norms allow. Lerner et al. (2020) relate that many of their participants talked about activism and collective action, being visible in representing their community, and engaging with political discourse online in spite of tensions between their desire to push for social change and their own privacy and sense of security. Irrespective of the security risks such as harassment and doxxing, as discussed in Chapter Six, trans people continue connect, share, and exist online. Just *being* oneself, the smallest act of resistance, can have significance. This is an important counterpoint in trans lives, where the "soft knife of everyday oppressions cuts slowly and delicately into the ordinary over the course of time" (Aultman 2019, 6).

7.3.2 Summarising queer failure

Failure as a concept is generally regarded as a negative outcome, but for some participants and social media users, it represents a source of symbolic power; living your truth, as it were, or your authentic self in the face of considerable hardship could be viewed as a particular strength of trans people. Arguably, the 'failure' of trans and

queer people to conform to social gender norms is a successful rebellion in itself; the distress of 'failure' is a productive means to resist cisheteronormative market forces "embracing refusal, vulnerability and despair" (Pirani and Daskalopoulou 2022, 8). Whether it is through welcoming all sides of gender presentation, mixing masculinity, femininity and androgyny like Georgie, Mars, Lucas and Sal, or taking ownership of the fact that transness can make a person stand out whether they choose to or not, like Emma, Carrie, Cassia and Casey, failing to adhere can be a source of strength. Embracing vulnerability could mean embracing the feeling of distress and the seemingly negative emotions which can help to motivate and drive social change.

The thesis extends the work of Pirani and Daskaloupoulou (2022) by highlighting how trans consumers can reject dominant market narratives and expectations, playing with gender in creative ways which disobey and rebel. Refusing social control through disregarding gender norms and rainbow-washing accounts of queer lives, resisting the consumerist drive to buy and sharing resources, regaining symbolic power in expressing themselves authentically, are all examples of queer failure in a trans context. Reworking the negative emotions of vulnerability and failure, trans consumers can accomplish a "riotous refusal" (ibid, 300) to concede their gender diversity despite adversity created by the very system which deems them to have failed. Here we can see the importance of acknowledging the role of vulnerability and distress in fuelling desire for equality and how failure can often represent strength, rather than only weakness as is so commonly assumed and associated with failure.

7.4 Contribution Three: Marginalised voices and trans joy

This contribution relates to research objective one, understanding how gender diverse consumers navigate marketplaces. In focusing on the voices of trans people, the ways in which they live in a consumption-based society and their personal experiences in the marketplace can be highlighted, as can the joyful, affirmative, fulfilling side of trans stories which is often neglected and forgotten in research with marginalised populations. The energising sense of trans rebellion expressed on social media demands not to be ignored. In their article on trans failure, Lehner (2022) discusses the Instagram feed of gender non-conforming, trans femme artist and writer ALOK. They describe ALOK's feed as an "open field" in which the artist can "playfully and joyously imagine and construct themselves in their own image" (ibid, 102). Instead of aiming for an appearance and presentation of trans as one or the other binary, Lehner argues that ALOK is disinterested in dominant cultural narratives of transness and instead finds joy in a "complex malleability of gender iterations" (Lehner 2022, 102).

Another paper which tries to capture trans joy is Camminga and Lubinsky's (2022) exploration of testosterone use among trans men in South Africa. The authors discuss the joy of the vial; in South Africa, access to testosterone has been challenging and trans masculine visibility sparse. The article selects from Instagram three visual representations of trans men's joy and gender euphoria, noting that having access to the vial (of testosterone) for these men represents "the antithesis to the anxieties" (ibid, 10). Both of these papers do however set the joy of trans within the context of the pressures and challenges faced by trans people, whether that is in regard to oppressive norms of gender, or having access to a life-saving prescription for gender-

affirming healthcare and medicine. This study adds to these expressions of trans joy, encouraging deeper understanding of the role of consumption in trans and queer experiences. Through highlighting both the vulnerabilities and potential for empowerment, this thesis aims to more fully capture the richness of trans lives, while maintaining a grounding and awareness of the realities which face gender diverse consumers.

Unlike the "happy queers" of advertising (Pirani and Daskalopoulou 2021, 300), academic research in trans contexts tends to highlight the oppression, vulnerability, stigma, and inequalities. This is not to say that these aspects of trans lives are not vitally important to leverage research towards a better society, but that the queer joy, liberation, and empowerment to be found in how trans people talk about themselves are much less prominent. Fitchett and Cronin (2022, 6) remark that "consumer culture has engendered deep cynicism, individualism, competition, envy, and inertia that are now elementary features of contemporary cultural life". This may indeed be true, but what is also true is the togetherness and strength which is embedded in my interpretations of the stories I heard in interviews and researched online.

Part of this strength is the very human connections between trans people. Through this study, I have come to know (and know about) some immensely compassionate individuals keen to look out for, nurture, critique, and stand alongside one another. Indeed, the relationships and connections between people may be one of the most important elements of social justice activism (Hagen et al., 2018). Although consumer activism in the trans community is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is nonetheless a

part of its contribution that some emphasis is placed on those bright points of empowerment and resistance in consumer lives. This research employs a sociological lens to explore gender and vulnerability in a consumption context. This involves seeing the contradictions and seeing beyond the contradictions to what is possible from a place of joy, as well as acknowledging adversity.

Interdisciplinary insights offered in this study represent an epistemological contribution, extending our understanding of the complex, interlaced, and labile concept of gender which trans consumers experience and live every day. This thesis also brings into consumer research the work of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, drawing on her writings on queer phenomenology to further highlight the role of bodily experiences and orientations in challenging power through the everyday. As stated in Chapter One, there are currently no available statistics on the proportion of the UK population who identify outside the strict male/female gender binary which is embedded in British society, although it is estimated to be around 0.1% of the population. Although a virtually tiny group within society, trans people and issues around gender diversity have become incredibly visible, yet there is very little research which aims to strengthen our understanding of trans consumer lives. Taking opportunities to tell stories that reflect "polyvocal realities" (Coleman 2015, 52), there is scope for research on the intricacies of LGBTQ+ lives to offer "moments of recognition" (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013, 37) that could add legitimacy to lives and experiences. As I write in the final closing note of this thesis, there is much hope to be found in highlighting and listening to the underrepresented voices in society.

Having outlined the three key contributions of the thesis, the chapter now moves on to exploring the managerial and policy implications of the findings.

7.5 Managerial and policy implications

The findings of this study help illustrate the importance of space in marginalised consumer experiences, exploring how the layout, makeup and design of space can potentially include and/or exclude those who align with non-normative identities. As noted by participants, retail spaces are usually divided on binary gendered lines which creates discomfort and conflict for those who do not fit into the gender binary. To make spaces more inclusive of all gender identities, physical stores could create different divisions, perhaps by solely product type or style for example in clothing retail. This could be simple to implement for online retail through search functions, removing the need for "men" and "women" as product categories. One perhaps less obvious benefit of improving spaces is that it creates a safe place for cisgender consumers who are experimenting with their presentation, as well as those who do not consider themselves trans but also fail to conform to typical gender norms, such as butch lesbians who like to present a more masculine appearance. Further, opening up spaces to be more inclusive of a range of LBGTQ+ identities may help to address the 'rainbow-washing' accusations that companies often find themselves subject to - with good reason. For research participants, showing care towards the community beyond Pride month marketing ploys such as changing logos to rainbow colours is significant.

279

The findings also highlight the importance of language and rhetoric; "representation is rarely value neutral but involves the exercise of power" (Moisander, Valtonen and Hirsto 2009, 339). Marketers and policy makers have enormous power over representations of trans people in the cultural sphere. Introduction and everyday use of inclusive language is one powerful way to combat transphobia and discrimination, yet it has often met with significant backlash in circumstances where it has been employed. The culture wars which continue to hamper progress towards improving legislation such as the Gender Recognition Act (2004) show little signs of abating, and media outlets like the Daily Mail carry on publishing pieces designed to foster 'gender critical' resentment of moves to alter language to make it more inclusive. Examples include referring to people with uteruses rather than solely women in medical literature on periods and childbearing, and the creation of gender neutral toilets in public spaces. These findings provide further evidence that such moves by policymakers and marketers can be felt positively by marginalised trans people.

As Clayton (2018, 474) eloquently and simply says "People engage in activism because of some perceived societal problem". Social change is a slow and painful process, but an important one for any society which holds equality, inclusivity and diversity as central to its social development and the cultural enrichment of its citizens lives. It should go without saying that the purpose of any equality movement is to ensure equal participation in society for everyone.

However, it is also important to note that social change which makes life more liveable for trans people is a broadly mutual goal among trans people themselves as well as

trans-positive activists. There is no overt appetite for removing rights or pushing out others such as cis women from safe spaces, or definitions of 'woman'. It has been claimed by some feminists that a "feminism for everyone" which has broader aims of social equality is resulting in the division and bitter schisms that can be seen in any discussion of gender or transgender (Lawford-Smith, 2022). I argue that for the most part, trans people like the interview participants in this study would simply like to be included in the conversation, their needs considered in wider social discussions, and for there to be space available alongside their cis counterparts fighting for equity and equality.

Organisations such as the Scottish Trans Alliance and Stonewall describe their goals in language such as working to "improve gender identity and gender reassignment equality, rights and inclusion in Scotland" (STA), and fighting for "for freedom, for equity and for potential" while creating "transformative change" (Stonewall). In the articulation of these goals, there is a sense of inspiration and optimism, a hope for an imagined future world. Positive changes can already be seen in some areas of life in the UK, with inclusive language for example becoming more prevalent despite vehement backlash. However as can be seen from the findings and discussion in this thesis, there is still work to be done in improving gender equality for the benefit of everyone in society. Thus, "the existence of social movements has to be considered as something fundamentally positive and necessary" (Touraine 2002, 93).

7.6 Areas for future research

Outside the scope of this study, there are some interesting areas raised through the findings which could be explored in future. Tackling the wicked problem of gender inequality and consumer vulnerability asks researchers to design and communicate their work to develop a more holistic understanding of social problems (Huff and Barnhart, 2022). The liminality of transgender consumer experiences could be a fruitful avenue of research; Mimoun and Bardhi (2021) introduce the concept of chronic consumer liminality with frequent, multiple, and nonlinear consumer life transitions. In the context of gender diversity, nonlinear transitions and frequent transformations of the self could be used to explore transness outwith typical understandings as a journey from one gender to another. Examining the narratives of trans people like Georgie, who experience their gender as constantly in flux, could improve our understanding of flexibility and fluidity in (a)gendered consumption practices. This could also follow on from Appau, Ozanne and Klein's (2020) work in the Journal of Consumer Research, looking at permanent consumer liminality. In their study of Pentecostal converts, the authors examine how religious services are consumed and the ongoing struggle of those converting to Pentecostalism with being an unfinished individual, one who is never fully separated from the world of temptation, nor fully incorporated into the spiritual world. Taking insight from these findings, research could explore the ways in which trans consumers experience transitioning; being neither fully one gender nor another, undertaking a transformation over a period of time which may not have a defined end point, how

does a persistent need or marketing drive for gender-affirming products and services affect consumer wellbeing? This type of question could be further explored through a theoretical framing of liminality.

The distress model could also be applied to consumer contexts of vulnerability beyond trans and gender diversity, focusing on marginalised dimensions of identity such as class or poverty, race or religion. In these contexts, factors such as culture wars, institutional barriers, self-policing and stigma can be experienced in specific ways depending on the focus of marginalisation. Stigmas based on religion, such as negative perceptions of hijab and other veiling practices among Muslim women, can be influenced by media narratives and culture wars around Islamophobia. Low-income consumers may self-police their conduct and appearance online so as to avoid stigmatisation and symbolic violence. For Black consumers, institutional barriers to healthcare and education may be dissimilar to those faced by trans people, but these barriers are still present. In these contexts, failure may still be a productive form of resistance to dominant consumerist logic and norms, but it is perhaps less likely to be queer in the same sense.

Queer theory has been thus far under-utilised in consumer research, and it has great potential for exploring the ways in which categories of identity in consumer communities can be and are being destabilised. Hearn and Hein (2015, 1633) note that although queer theory has been referenced in consumer research works, there has yet to be the development of "queer MCR (marketing and consumer research), especially beyond references to sexualities". Queer theory offers consumer researchers some

scope to unpack the LGBTQ+ acronym and examine how the identities grouped together under it can be fractured, contested, subverted, remade and repurposed. In studying alternative LGBTQ+ narratives, consumer researchers may be able to dive into the ways in which consumption resources are used to navigate intracommunity tensions. Through a queer theory perspective, consumer research can look beyond the experiences of gay men in Anglo-American contexts, seeking to explore non-urban consumer lives, the ways in which LGBTQ+ cultural differences and consumption practices become visible outside of North America and Europe.

As noted in the methodology chapter limitations of this research, the multidimensionality of consumer vulnerabilities has not yet been explored in depth. Through intersectionality, methodologically or employing it as a theoretical perspective, research could enhance our understanding of the ways in which different identities intersect and overlap in consumer experiences of stigma and vulnerability. This would be important from a policy point of view, as it would provide deeper insight into how to address these intersections. Age and intergenerationality in trans experiences would be an interesting avenue of research, as transness can have different meanings at different life stages. Exploring older trans people's consumption, those who have transitioned later in life, as well as working with younger trans people and their parents to better understand the dynamics and journeys of transness throughout life, could further add to our knowledge of stigma, vulnerability and identity.

Further, a focus on disability and gender identity could be useful; a number of participants of this study mentioned neurodiversity especially, and as part of the netnographic data collection, I observed an interesting junction between discussions of trans identities and neurodiverse backgrounds. Improving our understanding of neurodiverse experiences in marketplace contexts would have implications for marketing practitioners, drawing attention to how online and offline retail spaces are experienced differently to neurotypical consumers. Making such spaces more accessible and inclusive could also extend to other marketplace contexts outside of retail, such as education and healthcare, as participation in consumption practices in these areas may also be contributing to consumer vulnerabilities and distress.

7.7 A closing note on hope

Throughout this thesis, it has been noted that the voices and experiences of trans consumers are often overlooked in marketing and consumer research. When those voices are heard, the focus can tend to be on the negative; powerlessness, marginalisation, distress, oppression, and hostility – these are the words we associate with and often see alongside trans. However, as I aim to have shown here, these are not the only emotions encompassed in being trans. In writing this research, I have been inspired by, have laughed with, and been encouraged by, the amazing trans and queer people in my life.

Although sometimes elusive and hard to hold, I am proud of the thread of hope which is spun throughout my work. Hope which weaves together contradictions and tensions. Hope which is sometimes clothed in activism or rebellion, however intimate

and personal. Hope which wears its refusal and its failure openly and proudly on its skin. Hope which remembers the heartfelt humanity and compassion so often shown by those most diminished in society.

The final word here goes to author Juno Roche, on talking with trans youth:

"Many of the young people I interviewed came out by writing a letter to their parents and siblings, and often the letter would include a list of support contacts, parent groups and links to YouTube videos posted by other trans teens. Can you imagine being eight or nine and grappling with your gender discomfort, but still having the generosity and kindness to centre others as well as yourself?"

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Gender and identity

What does "gender" as a concept mean to you?

How would you describe your identity?

When might you feel or have felt uncomfortable or vulnerable in your identity (this could be your gender, class, race, religion, ethnicity etc.)?

Gender and consumption

How do you feel about expressing gender through what you buy?

In what ways might you use products to express your gender?

What has been your experience of shopping for products to help you express your gender? How do you feel these may benefit your wellbeing or everyday life?

Gender and advertising/media

How do you feel that gender is interpreted by people when interacting via social media?

How do you feel gender is interpreted and portrayed by mass media, such as newspapers and news websites, blogs, TV shows, movies, music videos etc.?

What assumptions do you think people and/or companies make when advertising or selling products to trans and/or non-binary people?

Support for trans people in Scotland

LGBT Helpline Scotland can be accessed by phone for those 16+, 0300 123 2523, available Tuesday & Wednesday 12-9pm, Thursday & Sunday 1-6pm.

LGBT Foundation is accessible by phone, 0345 330 3030, Mondays-Fridays 9am-5pm.

Mindline Transline can be reached by phone at 0300 330 5468, Mondays and Fridays 8pm-midnight.

LGBT Switchboard has an online chat available on their website and can be reached by phone, 0300 330 0630, available everyday 10am-10pm.

Appendix 2: Sample Twitter call for participants

I'm seeking non-cis folx to collaborate on my PhD research! I'm an intersectional feminist researcher working across marketing and sociology. If you're trans, enby (anyone not cisgender, basically!) and interested in gender, identity, and how these relate to being an everyday consumer, this is a chance to talk about it!

Please contact me by DM or email to Sophie.duncan-shepherd@strath.ac.uk to find out more.

Participant Information Sheet

Name of department: Marketing
Title of the study: Trans vulnerability: lived experiences of gender diverse consumers

Introduction
I am conducting research on vulnerability experiences of transgender and gender diverse consumers in the marketplace. I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Strathclyde Business School.

What is the purpose of this research?
This research aims to better understand experiences which trans and gender diverse consumers have in buying products, interacting online via social media and how their experiences are affected by news media. The study takes an intersectional feminist approach to investigate how different parts of consumer's identity are affected by vulnerability, taking an initial start from how gender is interpreted by consumers and marketers.

Do you have to take part?
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. Declining or withdrawing participation will not in any way be to your detriment.

What will you do in the project?
I will ask a range of questions about your life experiences and views on gender and consumption. All questions are optional, and you can request further information on the interview topics in advance of the interview. I may ask you to bring an object or photograph of your own that has particular significance for you in expressing gender. This is optional. The interview will be audio-recorded by the researcher so that I have an accurate record of what you say. Interviews will take place at a mutually-convenient location, discussed and agreed in advance between yourself and the researcher. Please note that we are generally not able to interview you in your own home. If you have disability access requirements that mean you cannot attend an interview in person, we can arrange to interview you via video call (e.g. Skype). Interviews will take place at some time between January and June 2020 (approx.).

Why have you been invited to take part?
This research is open to anyone over 18 years old, who self-identifies as trans, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, bigender, genderfluid, intersex, and/or as any other related minority gender identity.

What information is being collected in the project?
Information about you, your life experiences and your views will be collected through a verbal interview with the researcher. This might include personal information, such as your name and contact details. The information you choose to provide in the interview is entirely at your discretion and you are in no way obliged to discuss or disclose information that you do not wish to share.

Who will have access to the information?
The information you give in the research will be accessed only by the researcher. You will be asked for your preference of pseudonym, or if you wish, your real full name can be used in the research. This is entirely up to you, and if at any time you change your preference, contact the researcher who will make necessary changes immediately.

If you disclose a serious and imminent risk of harm to yourself or to another person, I may be required to breach confidentiality and discuss this with relevant bodies in line with adult and child protection legislation.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

Information provided during the interview will be kept on a secure, password protected PC, and any notes taken by the researcher will be anonymised and stored in a securely locked location within Strathclyde Business School. Any potentially identifying data will be securely destroyed after the publication of the doctoral thesis. Anonymised interview transcripts and notes may be retained for up to ten years for post-thesis journal publications, after which data will be securely destroyed.

Thank you for reading this information – please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

Please also read our Privacy Notice for Research Participants.

What happens next?
If you would like to participate, please sign the consent form overleaf to confirm this. If you have any questions, you can contact the researcher or project supervisor at the details below. You will be offered the opportunity to read interview transcripts and selected findings by mutual agreement at interview.

If you don't wish to participate at this time, thank you for your attention.

Researcher contact details:
Sophie Duncan-Shepherd
Department of Marketing
Strathclyde Business School
199 Cathedral Street
Glasgow
G4 0UQ
sophie.duncan-shepherd@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details:
Dr Kathy Hamilton
Reader
Department of Marketing
Strathclyde Business School
199 Cathedral Street
Glasgow
G4 0UQ
kathy.hamilton@strath.ac.uk

This research was granted ethical approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the research, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee
Research & Knowledge Exchange Services
University of Strathclyde
Graham Hills Building
50 George Street
Glasgow
G1 1QE

Telephone: 0141 548 3707
Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

Consent Form

Name of department: Marketing
Title of the study: Trans vulnerability: lived experiences of gender diverse consumers

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
  - audio recordings of interviews that identify me;
  - my personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to being audio and/or video recorded as part of the project

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date: