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RETHINKING PROFESSIONALISM

How non-binary and gender non-conforming employees navigate Heteroprofessionalism in Denmark.

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Abstract

Non-binary and gender non-conforming people face persistent challenges in expressing their identity in professional settings, shaped by heteronormative and cisnormative norms. In recent years workplace inclusion policies have made progress, although they often fail to address deeper structural expectations of "professionalism" that marginalise gender-diverse employees. This paper investigates how non-binary people navigate gendered expectations in the workplace, developing practices of daily survival and expression within corporate environments in Denmark. Using a queer phenomenological approach and based on the concept of heteroprofessionalism, the study analyzes interviews with six non-binary employees from different organizations.

This research describes that participants experience hypervisibility and invisibility simultaneously, as they are required to "perform" professional roles or self-censor within the gender binary. In parallel, they adopt creative strategies, such as strategic use of language to address performative challenges and dress codes, with the aim of regaining their personal voice and redefining their institutional recognition in the workplace.

The analysis contributes to queer research on visibility, gender and everyday performance by showcasing how heteroprofessionalism functions as a form of 'soft power' intertwined in unspoken rules. Gender, rather than understood as a barrier, emerges as a dynamic expression to redefine professionalism. By centering lived experiences, the paper offers tools for reflection and action for other gender non-conforming people seeking space, visibility, and euphoria in their work, while also supporting the need to move from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation, calling on organizations to rethink how "professionalism" is defined and monitored.

Keywords: Heteroprofessionalism, Non-binary Employees, Queer Theory, Trans Studies, Gender performativity, Organizational culture, Workplace experiences, Nordic context

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To Melina and Marina, always my home.

Μαμά, Μπαμπά, Ευχαριστώ.

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Part I

Introduction

Increasingly, gender and sexual diversity are becoming more acceptable in workplaces. In many workplaces, identities outside the gender binary[1] are being accepted, and sexuality becomes an independent part of identity, which does not affect professional competence (Ely et al., 2011). There is a newness in the dynamic presence of non-binary[2], gender non-conforming[3], and trans people[4] in work environments internationally. However, while 'coming out' of the closet seems to be increasingly easier, the expression of gender identity, in its full range, seems to be another issue. As gender identity functions performatively, Judith Butler states, non-binary people are required to 'do' their gender in the work environment while also applying codes of professional ethics and 'professionalism' (Butler, 2006). Research remains limited on how non-binary and gender non-conforming people negotiate gender performance while challenging workplace norms rooted in binary, cis- heterosexual[5] expectations of professionalism.

To elucidate these contradictions, we must firstly examine how these norms were institutionalized. Historically, workplaces did not simply reflect broader gender binaries but actively reinforced them by positioning compliance as a professional responsibility. Social conventions have historically supported a binary understanding of gender, classifying people as either male or female and pushing non-binary identities to the periphery (Lorber, 1994). Gender is now beginning to be recognized as a fluid construct that transcends traditional binary systems. This growing recognition of non-binary identities has led to greater visibility and

[1] "Gender binary is the idea that there are only two genders (girl/woman and boy/man), and that a person must strictly fit into one category or the other" (UW Medicine, n.d.).

[2] "Non-binary describes a person whose gender identity falls outside of the traditional gender binary structure of girl/woman and boy/man. Sometimes abbreviated as NB or enby" (UW Medicine, n.d.).

[3] "A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category" (Trinity College Dublin, n.d.).

[4] In this paper, the term trans refers to people whose gender identity or expression differs from the one assigned at birth. This includes people who identify with another gender, as well as those whose gender expression challenges dominant societal norm (Papadaki & Ntiken, 2023, p. 1325). Here, transness is understood as part of the broader experience of gender non-conformity.

[5] "Heterosexual is a term used to describe a person who is sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex, where Cisgender describes a person whose gender identity does not differ from the binary gender identity assignment that is given at birth" (UW Medicine, n.d.).

acceptance, albeit within a broader social context that still promotes cisnormativity[6] and heteronormativity[7] (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014).

This thesis therefore explores the research question of "How do gender non-conforming people navigate gender expression in professional environments shaped by the limitations imposed by heteronormative and cisnormative norms?*"* To address this, the study focuses on Denmark, using qualitative semi-structured interviews with gender non-conforming employees across different corporate settings. The analysis draws on participants' self-narratives and applies key theoretical tools, such as Butler's theory of performativity, Mizzi's concept of heteroprofessionalism, and concepts from organizational sociology and intersectionality, to investigate how authenticity, visibility, and conformity are negotiated in workplace contexts.

This study adds to the growing but still limited body of research on the experiences of non-binary employees. By focusing on the narratives of a population that is often marginalized or conflated with broader LGBTQ+[8] categories, the research offers insight into the specific negotiations of gender non-conforming people within corporate settings. Despite policy advances, gender non-conforming identities still face systemic barriers to authentic expression. Denmark was selected as the research site primarily due to the accessibility of participants and the practical feasibility of conducting the study within a single national context. While this thesis focuses on the Danish context, the findings contribute to broader international debates on gender diversity, professional norms, and global workplace inclusion, highlighting how normative structures affect queer[9] embodiment across socio-political boundaries. Recently, progress has been made in recognizing gender diversity, with some organizations implementing policies such as employee resource groups, diversity training, and gender-neutral facilities (Ely et al., 2011; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). However, these measures do not always address the deeper normative pressures that gender non-conforming identities are facing in daily professional life.

[6] "Assuming all people are cisgender" (Trinity College Dublin, n.d.).

[7] "Refers to heterosexual identities being considered the norm and the exclusion of any other sexual orientation or gender identity" (Trinity College Dublin, n.d.).

[8] "An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual. The plus sign represents people with diverse characteristics who identify using other terms" (Trinity College Dublin, n.d.).

[9] "A broad term used to describe individuals who do not conform to traditional gender and sexual norms. It can be used as an umbrella term to encompass a wide range of identities and experiences. The term "queer" has been reclaimed by many LGBTQ+ individuals and communities as a symbol of pride and resistance. It has become associated with a revolutionary spirit, representing a challenge to traditional gender and sexual norms and a demand for equality and acceptance" (UW Medicine, n.d.).

Gender expression that does not conform to predefined gender norms in professional environments can lead to difficulties, dysfunctions, and limitations for people who experience their gender identity as fluid. Consequently, exploring strategies for managing these challenges needs to be combined with an individual-centered narrative of their experiences.

A key focus of the research is their personal narrative, as gender identity, acceptance, and inclusion of gender non-conforming people are dialectically shaped by lived experience. Identity is not a fixed characteristic but arises from continuous negotiation between self-expression and the social, in this case organizational, context in which it develops. This process involves the affirmation of personal identity, recognition or resistance from the environment, followed by the rearticulation of identity. Theories such as Butler's performativity and Acker's critique of organizational norms support the view that identity is shaped through everyday interactions, influenced by power, and regulated through workplace structures. Through their autobiographical expression, individuals can capture both the euphoria of authentic gender expression and their sense of inclusion (or exclusion) in their work environment.

The thesis is structured in three parts. Part I introduces the research context, reviews literature on workplace inclusion, and outlines the theoretical framework. Drawing on queer theory, particularly Butler's concept of performativity, alongside organizational sociology and intersectionality, the framework positions heteroprofessionalism as a key analytical tool. Part II presents the methodology, detailing the qualitative approach and interview process. Part III offers an analysis of the interview data, connecting empirical insights back to the theoretical tools, and concludes with a discussion on the implications for future research and queer workplace politics.

Workplace Inclusivity and LGBTQ+ Studies

Workplace inclusiveness has been a buzzword in recent times regarding the development of organizations, the well-being of their employees, and their social responsibility (Shore et al., 2011). Broadly defined, workplace inclusivity involves creating an environment that welcomes diversity, values all types of employee identity, and nurtures equal opportunities for growth and involvement across the board. Inclusivity goes beyond issues of diversity and underlines active attempts towards making the employees, whatever their race, gender, sexual orientation, or whatever other factor might define them, feel that they are part of the workplace and are able to contribute to it fully (Maake et al., 2023). In particular, the issue of inclusivity for LGBTQ+ individuals has gained significant momentum over the past few decades, largely due to

legislative developments and a shift in social values towards equality and protection in the workplace (Badgett et al., 2013; Davies & Neustifter, 2023). Inclusivity is not only a professionally important aspect for LGBTQ+ individuals but also has deep social and psychological ramifications, affecting everything from job satisfaction to mental health (Brewster et al., 2016; Tordoff et al., 2022).

Research supports the relevance of workplace inclusivity for LGBTQ+ employees, since inclusive workplaces promote overall productivity and employee satisfaction. This is due to the fact, noted by Ely and Thomas (2001), that inclusivity supports diverse perspectives and fosters an innovative culture, where employees would feel secure in bringing out their own distinctive thoughts and experiences. Accepting workplaces helps to lessen the psychological burden often associated with discrimination and marginalisation for LGBTQ+ individuals (Githens & Aragon, 2009).

The literature clearly indicates that LGBTQ+ employees encounter both direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace, including social exclusion, harassment, and insufficient support, adversely affecting their career trajectories and psychosocial health. The necessity for workplace inclusivity is especially pressing due to the historical lack of institutional safeguards for LGBTQ+ identities, rendering them susceptible to discrimination and social marginalization (Tilcsik, 2011). Research indicates that, even in nations with established protective frameworks like the United Kingdom and the United States, prejudice persists through microaggressions and unconscious biases ingrained in workplace culture. The promotion of an inclusive work environment seeks to dismantle barriers by enacting policies that safeguard the rights of LGBTQ+ employees, establishing support structures like staff resource groups, and instituting diversity awareness training programs (Ragins et al., 2003; Ragins, 2008).

The importance of inclusivity, consequently, is not only linked to ensuring that people get a fair deal but also to the creation of an enabling environment that is safe and affirming, where LGBTQ+ people can thrive professionally without fearing reprisal or bias because of their identities (Day & Schoenrade, 2000).

Inclusive workplaces bring significant organisational benefits, in particular in terms of employee retention and corporate reputation. Research shows that when LGBTQ+ employees feel safe to express their authentic selves without the psychological burden of ‘covering up’ or hiding their identity, organizations experience lower turnover and greater job satisfaction (Meyer, 2003; Pichler, 2012). In addition, a demonstrated commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion

enhances ethical credibility and attracts top talent, positioning the organization as a progressive leader in an increasingly global and socially aware marketplace (Roberson, 2006).

Moreover, diversity-friendly companies are also in a better position to reflect the multiple markets they serve. Therefore, this helps them come into contact with a wide range of customers and also enables their companies to be more responsive to the complexity of the multicultural business environment.

In conclusion, workplace inclusivity is important in order to have a fair environment that encourages LGBTQ+ employees to perform on both a personal and professional level. An inclusive workplace, one that supports diverse identities and educates through awareness programs with a support mechanism, positively contributes to the successful performance of an organization by way of employee satisfaction, reduced turnover, and stimulation of a culture of innovation and ethical integrity. Inclusivity toward LGBTQ+ people therefore signifies not only a moral but also a competitive edge in the networked, socially responsible economy of today (Shore et al., 2018).

Literature review

Contextual Importance and Structural Barriers

Greater LGBTQ+ inclusivity has increasingly come to be seen as central to organisational effectiveness but also to broader socio-economic stability and equality. At the socio-political level, this drive toward inclusivity strongly connects with human rights, where many governments and organizations are increasingly recognizing LGBTQ+ rights as basic and essential needs for fairness and equality in society. Many international organisations around the world, like the United Nations and the European Union, have adopted policies that assure the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. This increased demand for legislative protections reflects a change in cultural attitudes toward inclusivity as core to social equity and has consequences for policies in workplaces from sector to sector (Ahmed et al., 2013). Despite Denmark's reputation for progressive LGBTQ+ policies, a gap remains between institutional inclusion and the everyday realities faced by non-binary and gender non-conforming people in professional settings. It is also testified that when governments and corporations determinedly promote the rights of LGBTQ+, it strengthens a collective atmosphere of inclusiveness, destigmatizes sexual orientation and gender expression, and dismantles a centuries-old prejudice against the LGBTQ+ population. The workplace, through inclusive policies, makes crucial contributions

to wider social progress. It acts to eliminate some elements of discrimination at the institutional level and builds acceptance levels across society (Bell et al., 2011).

Beyond human rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace has far-reaching economic implications, demonstrating the practical benefit of fostering diversity. Inclusive workplaces attract a wide-ranging talent pool and better retain employees, which improves organizational performance and increases employee satisfaction. This is increasingly important for organisations that want to remain competitive in a globalizing economy. Diversity within teams fosters innovative and effective problem-solving, as employees from diverse backgrounds contribute their unique perspectives to the issue at hand. When LGBTQ+ people feel supported in workplaces, they are the most likely to perform better and give valuable contributions to the pursuit of economic development. Inclusive organisations pay off not only at their own level but also at the level of national economic interest by helping to make the workforce healthier and more productive (Meyer, 2003).

The challenges and barriers that LGBTQ+ employees face in the workplace take overt forms of discrimination and more subtle ones, such as microaggressions. These experiences have been well-documented in literature to show the pervasive bias LGBTQ+ individuals face in professional contexts. Direct discrimination encompasses explicit acts, including refusal of promotion, harassment, and other exclusionary practices that flow from prejudicial beliefs about sexual orientation or gender identity (Zwingel & Doerr, 2024). The literature indicates that LGBTQ+ employees are usually treated differently from their heterosexual and cisgender employees, and these impacts occur in their careers, enhancing a hostile work environment (Ragins et al., 2003). For example, Tilcsik (2011) used a field experiment where he found out that openly gay males were less likely to get job callbacks compared to their straight counterparts amongst a population of American employees. Findings like these underpin that discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals is entrenched, and visibility within the workplace can create direct exclusionary behaviours on the part of employers and colleagues alike. It can also manifest in forms of harassment, ranging from insults and obscurity to overtly physical threatened actions, which cause acute psychological stress among sexual and gender minority employees. On the basis of harassment, Waldo (1999) estimated that a high proportion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender employees face incidents of harassment at workplaces, particularly in the form of insults and social exclusion.

This kind of harassment will often occur and continue in an environment that does not have a strict approach to anti-discrimination policies. A lack of supporting legislation may allow biased behaviours to proceed unhampered. The consequences of these discriminatory practices

are varied, ranging from a decrease in job satisfaction to a reduction in productivity levels with increasing turnover intentions among LGBTQ+ employees (Pichler et al., 2010). Direct discrimination like this not only stands in the way of career development for LGBTQ+ people but also impacts their well-being, as the fear of hostility at work perpetuates anxiety that can feed into isolation (Ozeren, 2014).

Apart from overt discrimination, LGBTQ+ employees often suffer daily microaggressions, which are subtler and more pervasive forms of discrimination. According to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities" that convey hostile or negative messages toward marginalised groups. Examples of microaggressions against LGBTQ+ employees include social exclusion, heteronormative-based presumptive statements, and insensitive comments regarding one's identity. Indeed, Nadal et al. (2010) cite that, everyday comments at work, such as "you don't look gay" or "that's so gay," reinforce the heteronormative standard and act to subtly invalidate the identities of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Such comments, so often marginalized as harmless, work to perpetuate a workplace environment that marginalizes non-heteronormative identities and ultimately serves to support an implicit bias of heterosexuality as the default or preferred identity (Tsouroufli, 2018). Therefore, exclusionary social dynamics at work become another form of microaggression, in which one may be excluded from informal networks or professional events because of one's sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact, other studies have documented, such as those by Waldo (1999) and Herek (2009), that these exclusions often make LGBTQ+ employees feel unincluded and less valued because they are subtly cued that their identities are not accepted within the dominant culture of the workplace. Concretely, this social exclusion might affect professional development through informal networks and mentorship, which are especially crucial for career advancement. Another issue with microaggressions is that they most often happen without a person noticing it, making them even more difficult to recognise and call out than overt discrimination, which is forcing LGBTQ+ individuals to keep silent in order not to disturb workplace harmony (Balsam & Mohr, 2007).

Last but not least, these microaggressions make for a massive effect. The incidents in and of themselves may be small, but the perpetuation of microaggressions can create a hypervigilant state of being and stress that affects the mental health of LGBTQ+ employees (Sue, 2010). Meyer's Minority Stress Theory suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals face a unique burden from such stressors, as they must prepare for an environment that, beyond typical job pressures, may question or even invalidate their identity. Besides, the effects of both overt discrimination and

microaggressions are alike. They create a hostile work environment that undermines feelings of belonging, job satisfaction, and well-being among LGBTQ+ employees. This is partly a problem to be addressed with policies, but it is essentially about the organisational culture changing into being more aware and enabled to counteract the subtle biases propping up exclusion and inequality (Thelwall et al., 2023).

Challenges

Internalized Stigma and Identity Concealment

Hiding one's identity can serve as a coping mechanism by which many LGBTQ+ employees navigate a hostile or unsupportive workplace environment. The literature notes that LGBTQ+ individuals often hide their identities as a strategic response to anticipated discrimination or exclusion, aiming to protect themselves from prejudicial treatment (Ragins et al., 2003). Research has documented that people hide their sexual orientation or gender identity as a strategy that decreases the risk for overt discrimination and microaggression, most especially in places of work that do not have anti-discrimination policies or poorly enforce them (Day & Schoenrade, 2000). The psychological costs of this kind of self-protection are enormous. In fact, hiding strategies require constant vigilance and self-monitoring because LGBTQ+ employees must be constantly adapting their behaviour in order to prevent 'outing' themselves, an experience of discomfort and isolation that may well be chronic (Goffman, 1963). Thus, while identity concealment may prevent discrimination in the short term, it also leads to a range of negative psychological outcomes. This suggests the complex trade-offs faced on average by LGBTQ+ individuals in unsupportive workplace settings.

The psychological toll of concealing one's LGBTQ+ identity is great, and studies have shown a strong association between identity concealment and poor mental health outcomes. Concealment is cognitively taxing, as a person must consistently modify personal details or redirect conversation away from one's personal life to avoid detection of sexual orientation or gender identity (Meyer, 2003). This chronic vigilance can result in heightened anxiety, stress, and mental exhaustion since LGBTQ+ employees are constantly needing to expend energy and attempt to control others' perceptions (Mandala & Ortiz, 2023). Smart and Wegner's (2000) research revealed that keeping a secret develops a cognitive load within one's mind, whereby one becomes preoccupied with keeping their identity hidden. This preoccupation with keeping the concealment results in a form of mental stress called 'preoccupation stress.' Researchers have linked this stress to lower job satisfaction and reduced productivity, as the mental

resources required for concealment divert an individual's concentration and involvement in their job tasks (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

This is further exacerbated by a sense of shame and internalized stigma, most often stemming from the need to hide one's sexual identity, which may have long-lasting effects on self-esteem and overall mental health. Internalized stigma refers to the ways in which LGBTQ+ people internalize societal prejudices and biases, resulting in the devaluation of one's identity as a coping mechanism within environments that reinforce heteronormative norms. Hiding, in response to stigma, plays right into that emotional distress in demanding that LGBTQ+ individuals hide part of themselves and reinforces the idea that their sex or gender identity is something to be held in. Pachankis' (2007) research shows that concealment is related to lower self-esteem in that LGBTQ+ employees who conceal their identity often report a sense of inauthenticity and self-criticism since they feel a disconnection between their personal and professional selves. Feelings of inauthenticity are associated with depressive symptoms and lowered overall life satisfaction, which also underlines the psychological burden of concealment strategies.

In addition to these personal psychological costs, concealing identity can have negative implications on work relationships and professional advancement. Concealment tends to inhibit LGBTQ+ employees from forming authentic relationships at work because one cannot fully be open in social exchanges since a person has to hide personal information (Cain, 1991). Lack of authenticity may, therefore, lessen the development of the relationships, which is an important prerequisite for mentorship, networking, and job opportunities. Besides that, concealment strategies can leave LGBTQ+ employees isolated from support networks since they tend to avoid seeking resources or centers of advocacy, which could help them find solutions to their problems, for fear that participation in such might give them away (Herek et al., 2009). Thus, while identity concealment might protect the employee from possible on-site discrimination or maltreatment, it also carries a long-term psychological and professional cost (Herek, 2007).

Structural Barriers in Policies and Practices

Structural policy and practice barriers significantly affect the ability of LGBTQ+ employees to work comfortably, especially in workplaces that fail to extend protections against discrimination and properly enforce such policies (Tilcsik, 2011). The absence of formal anti-discrimination policies makes up the root barrier to equal opportunity, leaving LGBTQ+

employees open to both blatant and subtle forms of discrimination. As some studies indicated, when sexual orientation or gender identity is not protected either by law or policy in a certain region or industry, employees who identify as LGBTQ+ are too often excluded, harassed, and have their career opportunities restricted. In this context, the general lack of far-reaching anti-discrimination policies not only tolerates discriminatory behavior but also sends an institutional signal of a lack of commitment toward inclusion. A workplace that does not protect the rights of LGBTQ+ people is one that has cultivated a culture ripe with silence and fear. This makes employees unwilling or even afraid to disclose their sexual identities out of potential adverse repercussions. The non-existence of policies speaks to a lack of belonging necessary to engage individuals in their work and make them productive (Papadaki & Ntiken, 2023).

In some countries, like the United States of America, it was until recent rulings that protection for LGBTQ+ employees became federally mandated. Many have therefore relied on state or local ordinances offering differing protections (Badgett et al., 2013). The patchwork approach has resulted in a marked variability of workplace experiences wherein employees working in locales that lack protective legislation are more likely to face discrimination and harassment (Ozeren, 2014). On the other hand, countries with solid legal frameworks in place, such as Canada and the United Kingdom, prove much more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people at work because clear protection against discrimination is enshrined at the national level. However, even though it is tough in these places, overcoming it remains difficult because the approach of organisations will still fall short of providing broad internal policy and cultural practice for full inclusivity (Wright et al., 2006).

Other structural barriers include policy implementation gaps. For example, many anti-discrimination policies have not been consistently implemented to give effect to inclusive workplaces. Although various organisations appear progressive in policy on paper, the practice of such policies often lags, making them finally contribute to the development of gaps between policy intent and lived reality. For instance, Buddel (2011) reveals that LGBTQ+ workers, even when anti-discrimination policies are implemented within an organisation, still frequently report instances of discrimination because managers do not apply such policies consistently and also make them part of a corporate culture (Pizer et al., 2012). Perhaps this inconsistency could be related to simple ignorance or lack of training by front supervisors, who either do not recognise subtle discrimination or do not know how to adequately handle incidents properly. Without enforcement, LGBTQ+ employees may feel unprotected and unsupported, as the policy infrastructure fails to provide the intended security.

Moreover, anti-discrimination policies are also not supported by organisational cultures in cases where inclusivity has not been stressed (Huffman et al., 2017). Without mechanisms of accountability in place, policies alone remain ripe with symbolism and bereft of actual change. Policies have a better chance of succeeding if they form part of an overall package comprising thorough training programs, periodic audits, and feedback mechanisms that allow employees to complain about acts of discrimination without fear of retaliation or retribution (Ozeren, 2014). Yet, in most workplaces, these mechanisms are either poorly developed or absent, allowing the thrust of such policies to be seriously reduced and leaving LGBTQ+ employees open to discrimination that is unlikely to be addressed. This lack of enforcement also allows for implicit biases, whereby colleagues and supervisors alike may commit microaggressions or engage in exclusionist behavior with little consequence, alienating LGBTQ+ co-workers and continuing a cycle of marginalization (Nadal et al., 2010).

Mechanisms of Minority Stress and Psychological Impact

The mechanisms of minority stress carry profound consequences in work settings for the psychological and health effects of LGBTQ+ employees. Minority stress theory, as first developed by Meyer (2003), is a concept referring to social stressors that are both unique to the experience of minority status and interact with general life stress to create mental health disparities among LGBTQ+ individuals. In the workplace, these include a sense of social rejection, isolation, and perceived and actual discrimination. Consequently, research has shown that these processes of minority stress have negative influences on psychological outcomes, reducing job satisfaction and, in turn, negatively impacting productivity and engagement. Hence, the need for supportive and inclusive workplace policies (Waldo, 1999).

The major mechanisms of minority stress among LGBTQ+ employees arise due to stress related to the social rejection and isolation of LGBTQ+ employees. Social rejection often materializes into acts of exclusion from social circles and informal work networks where one could feel subtly or overtly isolated because of their identity as LGBTQ+. For instance, studies have shown that LGBTQ+ workers often experience exclusion from social activities or conversations among colleagues, which can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Such exclusion creates an environment in which LGBTQ+ employees feel unwelcome or ‘othered,’ as they are implicitly reminded that their identities do not align with the normative expectations of the workplace. King et al.’s (2008) findings indicated that LGBTQ+ employees who felt socially excluded reported higher anxiety and lower overall well-being since a lack of

social support from the work environment diminished their sense of belonging. This social isolation is furthered by the fact that LGBTQ+ people also tend to keep personal information secret as a way to avoid undue attention and discrimination. By doing so, they further alienate themselves from their coworkers and build up a pattern of exclusion and distress.

In addition to social rejection, LGBTQ+ employees experience stressors related to discrimination, at least in the form of direct and perceived discrimination (Button, 2001). Discrimination-related stress refers to the psychosocial toll of being targeted by prejudice based upon sexual orientation or gender identity as well as the anticipated everyday discrimination. It has also been demonstrated that discrimination-related stress is particularly debilitating because it tends to be chronic, with LGBTQ+ employees feeling they must always be 'on guard' against discriminatory treatment. This hypervigilance, or 'minority stress anticipation,' is fatiguing and detracts from the LGBTQ+ employee's ability to fully engage in the work activity at hand. For example, in a study, Ragins et al. (2003) found that LGBTQ+ employees were likely to feel judged by colleagues or supervisors due to fears that their sexual orientation and gender identity may make them suffer at work, such as by lowering chances for job promotions or losing their job. The constant expectation of discrimination implies continued stress for LGBTQ+ employees in conducting work duties in an environment they feel will not keep them safe and trust them. This leads to a situation that Goffman (1963) calls "spoiled identity," when one's identity is at odds basically with social ecology. As Meyer (2003) shows using Minority Stress Theory, such subtle forms of discrimination have a profound impact on the psychological processes of LGBTQ+ employees, increasing stress levels while decreasing job satisfaction and increasing job turnover intentions. What cropped up was the idea that workplaces need to change more than just the adoption of policies but actively create inclusive cultures. This idea underscored the fact that while inclusivity might be a structural change, it really involves cultural transformation (Biswas et al., 2023).

These mechanisms of minority stress have many implications for psychological and health spheres, especially in relation to mental health. Various studies replicated findings where LGBTQ+ employees tend to report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and burnout compared to non-LGBTQ+ employees. Such disparities were attributed to the compounded stressors associated with their minority status (Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

Depression is a frequent consequence since the chronic experience of, or even simply anticipating, discrimination and exclusion fosters feelings of hopelessness and helpless blame, undermining the LGBTQ+ employees' potential to derive meaning and satisfaction from their work (Herek, 2009). Anxiety, often coupled with hypervigilance, becomes another significant

issue in that LGBTQ+ employees may worry about potential repercussions of being discovered. Burnout, comprising emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy, usually results from prolonged contact with hostile or unwelcoming work environments. In fact, Lewis et al. (2003) were able to prove that emotional exhaustion among LGBTQ+ employees in non-supportive workplaces is higher, which knocks their ability to perform their tasks well and creates a lack of motivation and productivity (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Workplace minority stress also has serious consequences on the levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and turnover of the LGBTQ+ group (Maslach et al., 2001). Besides, social rejection and discrimination bring a psychological burden of disguise, which may decrease job satisfaction as a result of feeling unappreciated and unsupported (Button, 2004). This, in turn, can only contribute to lower levels of job satisfaction as LGBTQ+ employees start feeling withdrawn from dealing with work activities because of feelings of being isolated or frustrated from an unaccommodating workspace culture (Huffman et al., 2017). But what disengages such employees is the cumulative psychological impact of the minority stress, where anxious, depressed, and poor mental conditions of employees' health would further prevent them from taking an active interest in their job and instead develop absconding tendencies. Due to this fact, the interaction of lower job satisfaction and lower commitment usually leads to increased intentions to quit among LGBTQ+ workers, who may eventually quit and move on to more inclusive and supportive environments (Frost & Meyer, 2023).

Such high turnover of LGBTQ+ employees has economic implications since organisations bear costs associated with recruitment, training, and loss of organisational knowledge; hence, making the addressing of minority stress mechanisms important in workforce retention (Pichler, 2012).

Conclusively, the mechanisms of minority stress in workplace situations have far-reaching consequences on the psychological and health status of LGBTQ+ employees. Social rejection, discrimination-related stressors, and pressures for identity concealment contribute to poor mental health, reduced job satisfaction, and lower engagement. These are clearly issues that require an all-point approach: strong anti-discrimination policies, an inclusive workplace culture, and supportive resources regarding mental health and LGBTQ+ employee networks. Such measures may buffer the effects of minority stress and allow LGBTQ+ employees to contribute fully to work environments without fear of rejection or discrimination, for the betterment of individuals and organisations alike.

Although there is some literature that analyses the challenges faced by non-binary workers, especially as part of a larger LGBTQ+ community, such as discrimination and intersectional

marginalisation (Bowleg, 2008), it remains limited. The utilization of primarily psychological or minority-focused perspectives (e.g., minority stress theory) in current research contextualizes non-binary experiences within a narrative of toil and struggle. This framing reduces gender-creative[10] expression to a problem to be addressed, rather than a source of empowerment. It omits the empowering, euphoric, and agentic dimensions of gender creativity and queerness. The encoding of cis/heteronormative ideas into workplace norms defines the notion of heteroprofessionalism. Heteroprofessionalism is understood as an institutional dysfunction that serves to oppress gender-creative, gender non-conforming employees. The comprehension of institutional heteroprofessionalism is still limited in quantity. The examination of how heteroprofessionalism influences the daily navigation of gender expression among non-binary and gender non-conforming employees is still insufficiently explored. Even fewer studies concentrate explicitly on European corporate environments or on ways to exist around them. This study, in line with Butler (1990), interprets gender as a performative act constrained by institutional norms rather than as a fixed identity. While minority stress models focus on individual challenges, Butler's paradigm illustrates how workplaces 'materialize' gendered hierarchies through repetitive expectations of 'professional' conduct (Butler, 1993, p. 2).

This research contributes on multiple levels. More specifically, it seeks to highlight the lived strategies of non-binary employees while simultaneously pursuing a queer institutional critique so that it can have a political impact. This research adopts an international perspective, recognizing that while the fluid experience of gender is predominantly personal, the strategies for managing heteronormative standards are relevant to the global non-conforming community. In particular, it brings to light gender-creative voices to document practices of resilience, resistance, and workplace reconfiguration. Thus, expanding Butler's analysis of performativity in corporate environments, heteroprofessionalism is being revealed as a mechanism that institutionalizes exclusion. Through this analysis it is possible to understand gender non-conformity as a reconfigurative force for organizational change.

Theoretical Framework

The rich theoretical frameworks underpinning workplace experiences of LGBTQ+ employees demonstrate how individuals navigate complex and intersecting identities within work

[10] The term 'gender creative,' as used in this thesis, refers to fluid expressions of gender identity that challenge binary norms in professional settings (Trinity College Dublin, n.d.).

environments set out by heteronormative expectations and systemic biases. This research makes use of three influential theories that have radically shaped academic research and discourse on issues of gender and sexuality. Intersectionality, queer theories, particularly Butler's and Sedgwick's, and organizational sociology are used as a theoretical root, on the triangle of which heteroprofessionalism is applied as a sophisticated and advanced theoretical tool for understanding the experiences of individuals who understand their gender fluidly or beyond the binary. They create a collective framing of institutional, dialectical, and identity-based dynamics that result in the concept of heteroprofessionalism, which serves as the main analytical tool of the study and helps contextualize the multidimensional challenges faced by LGBTQ+ employees and their implications for workplace inclusivity (Divan et al., 2016).

Although the analysis is grounded in Danish workplaces, the theoretical lens applied here addresses broader organizational structures and normative gendered expectations that exceed national boundaries.

Intersectionality stipulates that discussions focusing on the workplace experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals have to be co-located with the intersection of social identities, namely those touching on age, race, and sexual orientation. Initially designed to examine the compounding marginalisation of Black women, intersectionality now encompasses a wide range of contexts, including the workplace, where LGBTQ+ individuals often embody multiple juxtaposed identities, leading to diverse experiences of discrimination. It also means that various LGBTQ+ employees from other marginalised groups, such as women or ethnic minorities, would be more likely to face complex forms of workplace discrimination not captured by a single-identity framework of understanding (Bowleg, 2008). For instance, LGBTQ+ employees of colour face racial discrimination alongside homophobia[11], which constructs a different and intensified experience of exclusion compared to white LGBTQ+ colleagues (Michelson & Harrison, 2023). Intersectionality is an analytical framework that points out how systemic biases in policies and practices at workplaces commonly fail to address many of these intersecting identities. Because of this, approaches to diversity and inclusivity are usually incomplete (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) necessitates the recognition of multiple marginalised identities, which in turn calls for a more nuanced approach to workplace policies. This approach addresses the specific challenges faced by employees who find themselves at the

[11] "The fear and hatred of or discomfort with people who are attracted to members of the same sex" (Trinity College Dublin, n.d.).

intersection of various forms of discrimination. As the theory of intersectionality helps us realize that people do not experience discrimination in only one way, the experiences of gender non-conforming people and their work experiences are shaped by a mixture of things at the same time. In conjunction with gender, sexuality, race, and age intersect to shape how a gender non-conforming person must navigate expectations of a white, western, Eurocentric understanding of 'professionalism' in the context of the Danish workplace reality. While this theory draws attention to overlapping pressures, it simultaneously critiques the universalized tendencies of mainstream DEI efforts, which often focus on white cisgender homosexual narratives, ignoring alternative realities such as those of gender non-conforming people of color, people with disabilities, or people from different age groups.

While intersectionality highlights how systems of oppression overlap, queer theory offers an analytical toolset for understanding how gender and sexuality are socially constructed and regulated. Queer Theory by Butler (in Nash, 1990) and Sedgwick (1993) is utilised as a critical framework to understand how heteronormativity shapes and forms workplace settings. Located under the broad rubric of critical theory, queer theory opposes binary conceptions about gender and sexuality for more traditional approaches by suggesting that identities are fluid and socially constructed rather than fixed (Shields, 2008).

In queer theory, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is central to the understanding of identity. Butler argues that gender is continually constituted by repetitive acts, such as gestures, attitudes, speech, and dress, conforming to socially validated norms rather than being an innate property, as seen in Gender Trouble (1990, p. 33). It is understood that it is these acts that give existence to gender, rather than gender being an expression of a pre-existing self while being constrained by heteronormative cultural scripts (Butler, 1993). In work contexts gender becomes a site of regulation through both informal critiques and formal policies, thus increasing performative pressures (Pullen & Vachhani, 2013, p. 316). Through this theoretical approach, it is highlighted how non-binary and gender non-conforming people are implicitly forced to perform a particular gender, conforming to prevailing norms.

Among others, heteronormative structures recurrently burst forth onto the scene via policies, cultural norms, and social expectations related to work, giving vast breadth around the privilege of being a heterosexual and cisgender identity while plummeting those not falling into those categories (Sedgwick, 1993). Workplace dress and professional conduct typically enforce this binary gender norm in the lack of allowance for non-binary or gender-nonconforming individuals (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Theorizing queerness hence 'implies' that this kind of norm inheres not naturally but from social practices that ensure notions of the legitimacy of

heteronormativity. Consequently, Goffman (1963) refers to this process as 'identity management,' forcing LGBTQ+ employees to sometimes relinquish their authentic identities to conform to male and female categorizations. In such situations, this can take on the form of self-censorship, which might be psychologically traumatic for LGBTQ+ individuals who have to work in environments that call for the suppression of certain parts of the self that are important for personhood.

Queer theory bases its operation on challenging the foundational structures that underpin these norms, hence creating a basis for the advocacy of more inclusive policies that acknowledge and respect diversity in identity within a workspace (Warner, 1991, p. 5).

The concept of professionalism as a universal and neutral ideal is constructed with the help of organisational sociology. Acker (1990, p. 139) presents the image of a 'disembodied' worker, a worker who is implicitly masculine, competent, and detached from caring or embodied needs, who builds up organisational structures, making him a socially constructed and historically gendered norm. This universal worker serves as a template for job descriptions, workplace conduct regulations, and promotion criteria. This embeds gendered expectations into the very structure of institutional life. As Mizzi (2013) explains, professionalism functions as a form of "soft power" (p. 1603), subtly regulating who is considered competent or trustworthy through rules that are never fully defined. The ambiguity of these expectations allows for subjective enforcement, particularly around expressions of gender and sexuality that do not fall within binary or heteronormative norms (p. 1604).

This normalization of professional behavior across institutions is further explained by DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of institutional isomorphism, which describes how organizations tend to mimic each other in the pursuit of legitimacy. Through coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures (pp. 149-152), credibility in a common context is signaled through the consolidation of these professional norms across sectors.

Mizzi (2013, p. 1602) notes that narrow definitions of acceptable identity and behaviour are often reinforced by Western workplaces adopting such norms to appear unified and modern. This sociological notion provides an opportunity to understand workplaces more deeply as institutional conditions that reproduce dominant ideologies both around professionalism and around gender and sexuality, such as those of gender conformity, whiteness, and binary professionalism.

Heteroprofessionalism

Heteroprofessionalism as a concept was introduced by Mizzi (2013, 2016), referring to the strategic use of heteronormativity as a professional tool for regulating individuals (Mizzi, 2013, p. 1617). Davies and Neustifter (2023) emphasize that heteronormative discourse is created to disrupt and silence human agency. From the perspective that fear functions as a means of control, the dialectical relationship between professionalism as the 'normal' and 'otherness' is described by the concept of heteroprofessionalism, as analyzed by Mizzi (2013, p. 1034).

In the work environment, the concept of 'other' is understood as something dangerous or disruptive, while 'normal' is equated with productivity and security, giving rise to the idea of success at a personal level, initially, and then at a corporate/ organizational level. Along with the lack of gender expression beyond the binary (male/female), which represents the experience of an increasingly large global population, Mizzi (2013) argues that organizational anti-discrimination policies have largely failed to adequately address even issues of sexuality (p. 1617). Heteroprofessionalism ultimately functions as a 'compliance' tool that limits inclusivity, reinforcing restrictive workplace norms in relation to free expression and negotiation of gender in the workplace.

Beyond a context of regulation, heteroprofessionalism also functions as a mechanism that promotes internalized fear in queer and trans people. This fear, intensified by the internalisation of heterosexist and cissexist[12] norms, derives from the concern about how sexuality and gender will be understood and, by extension, dealt within the workplace (Davies & Neustifter, 2023, p. 1034).

These norms are internalized, encouraging conformity not only to institutional expectations but also to perceived social norms within the workplace. Within neoliberal and corporatised professional environments, queer and trans people are often implicitly, or explicitly, encouraged to conceal their identities in order to conform to dominant expectations of professional behaviour (Rumens & Ozturk, 2019). Davies and Neustifter note that it is precisely this dynamic that is described by heteroprofessionalism, which, operating through heteronormativity and cisnormativity, acts to regulate the self-presentation of queer and trans people (2023, p. 1034).

Heteroprofessionalism marginalizes LGBTQ+ identities and reinforces binary understandings of sex and gender by integrating cisgender and heteronormative concepts into everyday work

[12] "Viewing heterosexual (straight) and cisgender people as superior" (Trinity College Dublin, n.d.).

practices. The justification of these exclusions is enacted through formal policies, informal social interactions, and acts of self-regulation.

Heteroprofessionalism shaping work identity

Heteroprofessionalism, as external institutional control, utilises fear as a means of compliance and control, as demonstrated by Davies and Neustifter (2023). More specifically, they highlight internalised self-discipline as a key component of this. Queer and trans people are trained to control their presentation and behavior, anticipating control or retaliation. This fear is not irrational; it is structurally cultivated and reproduced through professional discourse that codes queer identity and gender differentiation as unprofessional, dangerous, or controversial (p. 1034).

According to Davies and Neustifter, heteroprofessionalism operates through "paradoxical (in)visibility." LGBTQ+ people may be very visible, prone to symbolic exploitation, monitoring, and stereotyping, while institutional narratives of inclusion erase or quiet them (2023, pp. 1037–1039). This dual process promotes a professional culture where identity must be suppressed to avoid sanctions.

Queer theory, and particularly its critique of identity regulation through social norms, forms the theoretical basis of heteroprofessionalism. Mizzi (2013) examines how heteronormativity and cisnormativity are normalized and institutionalized within professional discourse while at the same time analyzing how queer theory offers methodological tools "of imagining difference on its own terms" (p. 1606). Foucault's lens of governmentality is yet another aspect of heteroprofessionalism as a form of governance. Through the complex interaction of institutions, practices, and knowledge that govern the behavior of subjectivities (Foucault, 1991), professionalism functions as soft governance through processes of self-monitoring, internalization of expectations, and compliance with dominant norms. Mizzi (2013) stresses that heteroprofessionalism is transacted within a space of power where fear, obedience, and exclusion overlap (p. 1607). The dominant work norms are challenged since, according to heteroprofessionalism, professionalism isn't a field of neutrality or meritocracy but a framework of regulatory discipline. This stance shows how dominant narratives of inclusion and diversity tend to reproduce an environment of exclusion when the concept of professionalism remains ambiguous, rather than what it proclaims. It also acts as a magnifying glass on the lived experiences of people whose gender identity and expression contradict the typical professional role as it has been realised until now. Therefore, the theory of

heteroprofessionalism provides a useful analytical tool for understanding how gender and sexuality are integrated into professional life. It also highlights the marginalization or even elimination of queer and trans identities from the professional sphere when social and cultural demands invest in a specific normative type of "professionalism."

Professionalism and normativity

Promoting gender expression to be performed in a cis/heteronormative way by queer people is, as Davies and Neustifter argue (2023), due to discourses of professionalism. As its main focus in the neoliberal context is respectability and self-promotion, it inherently moderates diversity and "gender expansiveness" (pp. 1030, 1032).

As the concept of professionalism has become part of the professional identity of Western-oriented workplaces, from career guidance and recruitment campaigns to educational manuals and organizational goals for employee engagement, as a normative way of maintaining workplace normality, according to Mizzi, heteroprofessionalism enriches professional discourse as a professional value that excludes homosexuality (2013, p. 1602). What remains unconnected, or deeply analyzed, is the connection between heteroprofessionalism and queer and trans experience, that is, the gender-creative process of individuals in terms of their gender identity and expression in the workplace.

Under this understanding, even though professionalism can be particularly appealing since it offers a strong work identity and a positive self-image, as a result, those individuals who fall within the dominant norms are provided with security in terms of maintaining, developing, and generally including their identity. Similarly, individuals who do not fall into the dominant norms are marginalized since job retention is challenged under the prism of non-work attitudes (Mizzi, 2013, p. 1603).

Mizzi pays particular attention to the intersectional oppression of professionalism. Comparatively, Mizzi states that individuals who do not belong to the dominant heteronormative norm conform to a professional attitude to the detriment of their identity (2013, p. 1603). As it is clarified, there may be an intention to include professional identities through inclusion policies. However, these practices can have the opposite effects when they do not take into account the socio-historical realities of gay and lesbian workers when these identities are included in efforts to include gay identities, as it is pointed out. What remains to be included is the experience of trans identities as an ongoing dialectical relationship with one's gender identity that non-binary and non-conforming people in relation to gender negotiate on

a daily basis. And in this daily 'fluid' and out-of-gender-binary negotiation, professional dynamics play a crucial role in the development and fulfillment of the individual.

Navigating the Margins of Professionalism

While progress has been made in anti-discrimination and equality legal processes, especially in Western countries, including Denmark, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people still face structural discrimination in the workplace. Heteroprofessionalism explains how such discrimination is due, in addition to personal prejudices, to social norms that label certain gender identities as naturally 'unprofessional' or 'dangerous.'

Many queer and trans people find it difficult to participate fully in the workplace because of the way things are set up, which does not recognise or accept non-normative identities. Papadaki and Ntiken believe that the human rights of trans people continue to be infringed around the world. These rights include the right to work, to show their gender identity, and to receive the treatment they need (Papadaki and Ntiken, 2023, p. 1326). Even in Europe, where legislative protection exists, the needs of trans people are often not taken into account by institutions, leading to a culture in the workplace where gender diversity is not part of policy, discussion, or support systems (Papadaki and Ntiken, 2023, p. 1328). This silence makes it look like people with creative or non-conforming gender are outliers rather than normal individuals who can participate in working life.

Although LGBTQ+ rights are protected by law in Denmark, many non-binary and gender non-conforming people believe that they are deemed 'confused,' 'difficult,' or 'unprofessional,' especially when their pronouns, appearance, or names do not satisfy binary standards. Many scholars (Papadaki & Ntiken, 2023; Mizzi, 2013) have indicated that this inaccuracy may result in direct occupational prejudice, particularly in the recruiting process (Papadaki and Ntiken, 2023, pp. 1342 - 1343).

People who are gender-creative are often only allowed to work if certain conditions are met. Inclusion is usually symbolic as a kind of tokenism rather than something substantial. Queer and trans employees are expected to remain professionally credible by conforming to dominant norms and limiting the visibility of their identities. This marginalization occurs not only by remaining outside of social groups but also by keeping their personal and work identities separate. Workers who are queer or trans often feel they must separate their real selves from their work identity. This can cause mental distress and a sense of not belonging (Davies and Neustifter, 2023, p. 1035).

Heteroprofessionalism helps us to understand how these forms of discrimination are not accidental or isolated but embedded in broader cultural scenarios of professionalism itself. Professionalism, as it is currently structured, creates a disciplinary environment in which queer and trans people are always negotiating risk. The risk of being seen as incompetent, the risk of being seen politically, or the risk of being labeled as deviant. This aligns with Mizzi's (2013) assertion that professional identity is constructed within a space of fear and exclusion, where individuals outside the dominant norms of gender and sexuality are denied the full privileges of inclusion in the workplace (p. 1604).

The role of policy and organizational culture

The structural manifestation of heteroprofessionalism extends beyond interpersonal dynamics and internalized self-regulation. Through the rules and policies governing organizational life, inclusion and diversity policies, while evangelizing the promotion of progress, typically perpetuate heteronormative and cisnormative norms through the use of general terms, not focusing on certain groups and expecting everyone to conform.

Mizzi (2013) states that professionalism is still a vague idea in many workplaces, meaning that people may have different, and sometimes distorted, ideas about what 'appropriate' behavior is (p. 1604). In real life, this means that people in a company, especially those in management or HR, have a great deal of freedom to decide what is and is not professional legitimacy. This kind of ambiguity makes it possible to view gender non-conforming conduct as unprofessional, even when there are no clear prohibitions in policy.

These implicit methods of enforcement that come from this unregulated interpretive space illustrate what Mizzi describes as the expectation that employees will control or hide the 'controversial' parts of their identities, especially if these parts go against popular ideas about gender and sexuality (2013, p. 1604). Because of these unwritten rules, non-binary and gender non-conforming people are often forced to hide parts of themselves to avoid being perceived as disruptive or inappropriate. These organizational norms promote heteroprofessionalism by rewarding those who follow gendered expectations and leaving out or punishing those who do not conform to these norms.

Although codes of conduct may refer to concepts such as 'diversity' or 'respect,' they rarely offer explicit protection to gender-expansive people, which makes institutional repression more powerful, since the rules are vague and general. This deprives individuals of agency and leaves room for supervisors, colleagues, and clients to police gender expression in the context of a

heteronormative and cisnormative social reality. Mizzi asserts that professionalism constitutes an area of "soft power," as it combines societal and institutional norms to regulate 'diversity' under the pretext of neutrality and unity (2013, p. 1603).

Consequently, heteroprofessionalism functions not alone through fear, silence, and internalized standards, but also through political and corporate cultures that endorse and perpetuate gender norms. These systems subject non-binary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming individuals to perpetual uncertainty, risk, and exclusion in the workplace, even within environments that proclaim to be inclusive. As Mizzi (2013) characteristically states, the omission of queerness and identities outside the gender binary from DE&I policies demonstrates a broader discomfort with the legitimation of these identities in professional discourse (p. 1605). This exclusion serves to reinforce professionalism as a heterosexual, binary norm masquerading as neutrality (p. 1606).

Table 1. Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework	Key Contributors	Core Concepts	Relevance to gender non-conforming experiences in corporate settings
Intersectionality	Crenshaw (1989); Bowleg (2008)	Emphasizes the interconnected nature of social identities, such as age, race, gender, and sexual orientation, which collectively shape unique experiences of marginalization.	Highlights how non-binary employees with intersecting identities face compounded discrimination in the workplace.
Queer Theory	Butler (1990, 1993); Sedgwick (1993)	Challenges binary and normative constructions of gender, focusing on the performativity and fluidity of identity.	Analyses how non-binary identities are pressured to 'play' roles within heteronormative professional structures.

Organizational Sociology	Acker (1990); DiMaggio & Powell (1983)	Organisations operate on the basis of the 'neutral' worker, who is in practice gendered and culturally defined (white, cis, masculine).	Explains how corporate rules of professionalism hide unequal gender expectations and reproduce discrimination against gender-nonconforming people.
Heteroprofessionalism	Mizzi (2013, 2016); Davies & Neustifter (2023)	Professionalism functions as a normalization tool through heteronormative and cisnormative codes, while it operates with 'soft power.'	It makes evident how queer and non-binary people are forced to self-censor themselves in order to be considered 'normal' and 'professional' within corporate spaces.

PART II

Research Methodology

Epistemological and Theoretical Foundations

In this research, heteroprofessional norms are understood as deeply rooted in corporate structures, such as HR policies and dress codes, defining the view of the world through a queer materialist lens. Yet it contains an understanding that these structures are constantly challenged by the embodied subversion of gender. Classical realism is rejected by focusing on how non-binary workers modify the workplace through everyday acts of expression and, by extension, resistance, including the pronouns and clothing in use. This theoretical framework for gender performativity, as evident in Butler's (1990) work, transcends formal materialism by envisioning queer embodiment as a material force that changes organizational spaces (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71).

Epistemologically, a queer constructivist way of thinking is adopted, since knowledge is co-created with gender non-conforming people. Following Halberstam's (2018, p. 32) "queer art of failure," significant non-normative ways of knowing and stories are promoted that show how unstable 'professionalism' as a cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal concept is. The researcher's sovereignty is challenged, and the researched become co-researchers of their own lived experiences, identifying with the radical interpretivism of Guba & Lincoln (1994, p. 111). By combining constructivism's focus on facts and queer materialism's focus on the practice of the body, it becomes possible to critically reflect on institutions and be open to new ideas.

As Naz, Gulab & Aslam state in their paper, multiple realities are created by individuals through specific and particular socio-cultural contexts, concluding with the assumption that reality is not unique and absolute for everyone (Naz et al., 2022, p. 42). It is this assumption in qualitative research circles that makes this particular research methodology the most ideal for exploring the lived experiences of trans and non-binary people within corporate environments in European countries.

Qualitative research is a practical approach to investigate both the reasons and especially the experiences of units experiencing particular social or "human problems," as Creswell & Poth state (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 8). It is this narrative, on the one hand of an experience, understanding it as an 'issue' but also explaining and analysing the lived problem that is relevant to this study. Qualitative research is ideal for such an approach since it can be used as a tool to explore in-depth issues, which, as Nas, Gulab & Aslam explain, refer to different levels of complexity. Always focusing on the individual's experience, the limited number of participants gives space to explore issues and, in essence, to make the voices of those involved heard more loudly (Naz et al., 2022, p. 43).

The literature confirms the choice of qualitative research as the most appropriate for exploring trans experiences and gender identity fluidity in corporate environments in this research. Quantitative methods by definition focus on main categories that are already known and visible in society. They cover those categories that cover a visibly/vociferously significant part of society and thus statistically significant.

Within a social justice paradigm, as Rainbow Health Ontario aptly describes, "qualitative research is an essential tool to give voice to stories that have been suppressed or silenced and to illustrate the complex impact of oppression on individuals and the LGBTQ+ community." (Rainbow Health Ontario, 2012/2018). The expectations of this study for the voices and experiences of the trans and non-binary community to be heard could not be better described. After all, as Naz, Gulab, & Aslam remind us, researchers can better understand behavioral conditions from the perspective of study subjects and move beyond statistics with the help of qualitative research (Naz et al., 2022, p. 43).

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative phenomenological design based on critical queer epistemology. In this approach, priority is given to a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of the gender-creative people navigating heteroprofessional norms.

Simultaneously treating participants's narratives as embodied knowledge that disrupts institutional norms aligns with Ahmed's (2006, p. 71) queer phenomenology. The flexible research framework is achieved via semi-structured interviews that allow participants to redefine 'professionalism' through dialogic co-construction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-112) and integrate Halberstam's (2018) "queer art of failure" by evaluating non-normative strategies in the workplace (p. 32). Focusing the research on workplaces in Denmark, including multinational companies and other professional environments where global corporate logics intersect with local norms and progressive policies, the one-time interviews function to document current expressions of heteroprofessionalism, revealing enduring patterns with the thematic analysis.

The phenomenological method rejects positivist generalizations. Instead, it illuminates how heteroprofessionalism is experienced and subverted differently. Thus, the choice of this design remains relevant to queer theory's questioning of dominant narratives (Halberstam, 2018, p. 32) and how their interpretivism focuses on "contextual truths" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

State-of-the-art methodologies

Research on the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community overlaps the research on non-binary and gender non-conforming people in the workplace, which remains comparatively limited. While much of the existing literature is based on quantitative methodologies that tend to homogenize diverse identities, they fail to capture the situated, embodied, and affective dimensions of gender nonconformity (Tilcsik, 2011, p. 1463; Pichler et al., 2010, p. 239), non-binary perspectives are often excluded or incorporated due to methodological limitations, sampling constraints, or lack of recognition in institutional research frameworks (Vriesendorp and Wilson, 2024, p. 495).

Minority stress theory, introduced by Meyer, and organizational justice theory, with Greenberg as the main contributor, theoretically dominate the existing literature. Minority stress theory understands stress as a function of systemic discrimination, social rejection of the LGBTQ+ community, and hence, internalized stigma (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). Focused on mental health, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction, it explains the psychological burden of individuals belonging to minority groups from hostile or heteronormative environments (Brewster et al., 2016, p. 236; Hatzenbuehler, 2009, p. 898). Organizational justice theory, respectively, highlights how understandings of unfairness in fairness or day-to-day treatment affect well-

being and organizational commitment (Colquitt et al., 2001, p. 430), exploring perceptions of justice in procedural, distributive, and interactional domains (Greenberg, 1987, p. 10).

In the context of this study, the above theoretical tools have significant epistemological limitations despite the important organizational and psychological insights they offer. Minority stress theory, by positioning individuals primarily as victims of harm, tends to pathologize queerness, thus neglecting issues of performative disidentification, agency, or resistance. In the same way, organizational justice theory fails to critique how dominant norms shape 'occupational' value in the first place and treats organizational justice as a managed variable. As such, both frameworks do not adequately challenge the deeper political dynamics of recognition, ultimately reinforcing a managerial logic.

Studies such as narrative inquiry, grounded theory, and case studies have offered important nuances to qualitative research on LGBTQ+ experiences in the workplace but at the same time remain conceptually limited by emphasizing temporal progression and identity coherence rather than highlighting the ambiguity of bodily and spatial dimensions of experience (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 251). For example, narrative approaches fail to highlight how queer experiences are interrupted, disoriented, or do not fit into coherent narratives, emphasizing the linear dimension of identities as linear life stories (Halberstam, 2011, p. 15).

As few studies still explicitly adopt queer or feminist epistemologies, such as situated knowledge, embodied standpoint theory, or reflexive co-construction, traditional ways of doing qualitative research run the risk of reproducing normative assumptions about identity, even as they seek to capture marginalized voices.

From tone of voice and dress code to communication style and posture, these are some of the ways in which heteronormativity and cisnormativity are encapsulated in the same codes of 'professionalism' as described in the theory of heteroprofessionalism, an important and significantly unexplored conceptual tool coined by Mizzi (2013). It thus demonstrates how queerness is not only excluded from professional life but disciplined and domesticated within it.

Despite its theoretical potential, the theory of heteroprofessionalism has rarely been implemented, especially in empirical studies. The absence of research on how non-binary people navigate, reshape, or subvert these norms is reinforced by the lack of application of the theory in European corporate cultures.

To address these theoretical and methodological gaps, this research uses a queer phenomenological methodology, following Ahmed's (2006, pp. 1-29) contribution, drawing on the lived, embodied, and spatial experiences of non-binary and gender non-conforming

people in corporate environments. Through queer phenomenology, it becomes possible to analyze the processes by which felt validation, or the lack of it, of one's being or experience, the ways in which normative assumptions on gender are experienced, readjusted, or challenged, and how bodies are oriented in the space of everyday professional life.

Following the phenomenological tradition, semi-structured interviews are used to elicit personal narratives regardless of coherence or closure (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57), while from the queer epistemological approach, binary gender framings are rejected and actions of visibility, creativity, and resistance are emphasized.

Further grounding the research in methodological reflexivity, through the researchers' position as a non-binary trans neurodivergent femininity, racially white European, informs, beyond access and relationship, the ethical responsibility to represent complexity without flattening.

By rejecting the understanding of gender creativity and diversity as an issue to be 'solved' or as a 'category of inclusion,' this study positions the non-binary experience as a source of knowledge. Concepts such as professional competence, dignity, and success in the workplace are reimagined and challenged through such experiences, and rather than focusing on anxiety or a sense of justice, it explores how, through queer embodiment, professionalism is redefined, challenged, and shaped in the workplace.

Ultimately, this research is an attempt to contribute to a growing field of critical queer studies of organizations that is not content to be inclusive for the sake of inclusion. Instead, it seeks to transform and challenge the very criteria by which 'participation' and 'visibility' in the workplace are defined.

Data Collection

This research employs semi-structured interviews to highlight the experiences and ways that gender non-conforming people experience heteroprofessional expectations in corporate settings in Denmark. As Naz et al. state, this tool becomes particularly useful for gathering complex "experiences and perceptions" (Naz et al., 2022, abstract), particularly about understudied groups or topics, such as non-binary corporate employees (Papadaki and Ntiken, 2023, p. 1330). Semi-structured interviews enable a balance between flexibility and structure, allowing participants to clarify their understanding and management of work expectations while permitting the researcher to investigate emerging themes in greater depth. This is particularly important to explore heteroprofessionalism, since it operates simultaneously with explicit work policies and implied expectations (Naz et al., 2022, pp. 43-44). This approach, in

contrast to structured or unstructured interviews, facilitates the identification of implicit assumptions and allows participants to redefine heteroprofessionalism according to their perspectives during the dialogue with the interviewer (Naz et al., 2022, p. 44). The study by Papadaki and Ntiken, including transgender people in Greece, shows the efficacy of the method in addressing marginalized gender identities (Papadaki and Ntiken, 2023, p. 1330). An interview guide was created based on the five-step approach suggested by Naz et al. (2022). Beginning by outlining the key preliminary steps, followed by exploring the relevant literature, like queer theories and organizational sociology, a robust theoretical framework was made. Based on this foundation, the initial interview questions were drafted and tested in a pilot interview. Feedback from the pilot was used to revise and finalize the interview guide (Naz et al., 2022, pp. abstract, 45).

The questions followed the principles of specificity (e.g., How do dress codes affect you?), division (themes such as "identity and professionalism"), and tacit assumption (revealing “professionalism” as a gendered construct), as noted by Naz et al. (2022, p. 44).

A clear interview protocol provided consistency and rigorous treatment throughout the interviews, including introductions, confidentiality assurances, and consent procedures (Naz et al., 2022, p. 50). This established trust, which is essential for addressing sensitive topics like workplace discrimination (Naz et al., 2022, p. 44). Pilot testing showed the need for simplification of terminology (e.g., “heteroprofessionalism” was explained as “heteronormative work expectations”). As Naz et al. point out, such changes improve the accuracy of the data (2022, pp. 50-51).

Semi-structured interviews produce rich data but rely on the researcher’s skill in balancing flexibility with structure (Naz et al., 2022, pp. 50-51). To mitigate bias, changes to the questions were systematically monitored in the process of interviewing (Naz et al., 2022, pp. 45- 46), and greater emphasis was given to participant-led narratives (Naz et al., 2022, p. 44). This study applied the principles of Naz et al. (2022) to queer research, demonstrating that semi-structured interviews can reveal institutionalized norms while prioritizing marginalized voices. This framework may be adapted in future studies (Naz et al., 2022, p. 44; Papadaki and Ntiken, 2023, p. 1330).

Participants, Sampling, and Recruitment

Due to the nature of researching heteroprofessionalism in corporate environments, snowball sampling approach was initially adopted, starting from the researchers personal network. A non-binary professional working in a Danish multinational company worked as the first

connection to other potential participants and worked as a pilot interviewee (Papadaki & Ntiken, 2023, p. 1330). This method is proven to be effective in building trust, an important condition for discussing experiences, such as gender expression and its components in the workplace and ways of mitigating opressing binary expectations (Naz et al., 2022, pp. 50–51). Continuing in public posts on multiple groups on social media was made (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). Understanding and respecting Danish and community culture of connection via Facebook groups (e.g., Queer Exchange DK, Queer Expats in Denmark), a post attracting participants was made to broaden the participants engagement. The qualification criteria were for participants to self-identify as non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, or any other self-identification out of the binary genders (man/woman) and be employed in a corporate setting. Professional environments, whether public, private, multinational, or local, seem to be characterised by explicit or implicit codes of 'professionalism.' The sample selection reflected both the limitations in access to the gender non-conforming population in Denmark and the availability of individuals who met the research criteria. The decision to focus solely on Denmark was driven by pragmatic considerations, including access to participants and the scope limitations of a single-researcher master's project.

Data were collected between March and July 2025 through online semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The online format was chosen to both accommodate participants living across Denmark, while providing a sense of privacy and comfort, helping participants to open more easily during the conversations. Prior to each interview, participants were advised to secure a quiet space, free from interruptions, ensuring confidentiality and secure expression. Interviews were audio recorded with written consent, following literature suggestions that recording preserves the accuracy of qualitative data by documenting details that are lost in handwriting notes (Naz et al., 2022, pp. 50-51). Recordings were transcribed verbatim, with filler words (e.g., "um," "ah") removed for readability, following Bizzeth and Beagan's (2023, pp. 3–4) protocol in order to maintain narration coherence without altering the content.

Particular attention was given to ethical considerations during the research process. All participants' names were changed to randomized titles such as participant M., E., T., to ensure anonymity, and records were encrypted. The consent form explicitly included the rights of participants, including the ability to withdraw or discontinue from the study at any time. These actions align with Bizzeth and Beagan's (2023, pp. 3-4) reflective approach to ethics, which emphasises participant agency and transparency.

The final sample included six individuals aged between 22 and 45. Their self-identifications included non-binary, agender, genderqueer, and trans feminine identities, while participants came from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. At the time of the interview, one participant was unemployed, while others were employed in Danish or international companies, either headquartered in Denmark or part of larger multinational structures.
The deliberate decision to present the demographic data collectively stems from a commitment to de-emphasize fixed categories of identity, but rather center the lived and embodied experiences of the participants.

Thematic Data Analysis: An Inductive Approach

This research uses thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns in the interview data, following Braun and Clark's (2006, pp. 77-82) framework. An inductive approach was chosen as the study explores the methods of managing heteroprofessional norms by gender non-conforming people in work environments. At first, the interview transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the participant's narratives, while a critical interview journal was kept to record important nonverbal observations, early thoughts, and positionality based on personal experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). This facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the data prior to the initial coding on a structural and semantic basis. Structural coding entails categorizing data according to interview questions or predefined categories (Guest et al., 2012, p. 13), whereas semantic coding focuses on specific conceptual categories relevant to the study issue (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 84). Themes were developed and categorized by continuous data comparison (Patton, 2002, p. 465), including instances of opposition to heteroprofessional norms and events of conflict avoidance for personal safety. The study prioritizes comprehensive descriptions of illustrative quotes over the frequency of their usage, as suggested by Kallio et al. (2016). The objective is to present events rather than measure them.

Ethical Considerations

The topic under study is of particular sensitivity, and therefore ethical considerations were central to the research process. Workplace experiences related to gender identity are likely to be a sensitive issue for many people due to historical and socio-economic variables. More specifically, issues of identity and acceptance in the workplace may stir up feelings of insecurity in relation to both job retention, which is a key point of survival, and existential

issues of identity. In order to safeguard the privacy and protect the psychological and emotional well-being of participants, a set of ethical safeguards was implemented.

All participants gave informed consent before participating in the study. Consent forms were given for completion at least 2 days prior to the interview to allow time to study and express any questions or concerns. The consent form included a detailed explanation of the objectives of the research, the interview process, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were explicitly informed before the interview that they could withdraw from the research at any time if they wished.

A confidentiality protocol was used throughout the research to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Titles "participant M, Participant E.," etc. were used in random order at all stages of the study, while information that could lead to the identification of participants was omitted or sufficiently anonymized, such as workplace details. Data from the audio recordings and transcribed interviews were securely stored in encrypted files and were accessible only by the researcher. This study followed the research ethics regulations of Aalborg University, ensuring ethical data collection and processing, as well as the protection of participants.

Interviews were conducted via online meetings, through the university's official communication platform (Microsoft Teams), with the main purpose of ensuring that participants were in an intimate and safe space for them. The choice was made in order to avoid any discomfort or sensitivity that might result from being physically present in an unfamiliar environment.

A trauma-informed approach to interviews was taken, understanding that issues such as gender identity and related workplace experiences are sensitive and potentially vulnerable topics of discussion. Principles such as the free, associative flow of the interview and respect for the rhythm of the participants respond to this approach. Participants were encouraged to take breaks whenever they felt like it and to skip any difficult or emotionally charged questions.

Researcher's Positionality and Reflexivity

As a researcher, my positioning is natural and unavoidable in research while also playing a central role. As a white, non-binary trans femininity of Greek origin and shaped primarily by my lived experiences in Greek working socio-cultural contexts, my approach to analysis carries a clear identity. In the past, I have identified as a gay man, while in recent years I identify, understand, and experience the world through the identity of non-binarity. I recognize the complexity of my embodied experience since, while I strongly identify with non-binary and

trans-feminine subjectivity, I also recognize that my body is often read as masculine or "male" in public spaces, thus benefiting from various forms of gender and racial privilege, particularly when perceived as a cis man.

At the same time, I acknowledge that my whiteness and European ancestry, even if Greece is at times seen as peripheral or 'inferior,' provide systemic advantages. These racial advantages in a Danish context provide me with privileges that are not as available to people who are not racially white or from regions outside of the Global North. These advantages shape how I am perceived and accepted in academic research and in workplaces, influencing my perspective. Further, as a neurodiverse person, the way I move in interpersonal interactions, structure attention and energy, and process information is directly affected. Instead of understanding this element as limiting, I perceive my neurodivergence as yet another level of situatedness. A level that makes me sensitive to non-normative forms of communication, flat interviewing relationships, and the need to co-create adaptive and participatory interviewing environments. In this context, I am not claiming neutrality. On the contrary, I adopt a reflective and transparent attitude throughout the research. I am aware of the internal/external dynamics at play. Thus, in some cases I shared my lived experiences or common language code that is typical of the queer community with participants, such as gender non-conformity or experiences of non-recognition in workplaces. In other cases, I acknowledged my limitations in fully understanding the structural barriers that intersect due to race, age, or other identities I do not necessarily inhabit. To minimize the weight of these biases, multi-layered reflexive methodology was used. This included bracketing my own assumptions, maintaining a reflexive journal, and revisiting my positions throughout the data collection and analysis (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020, pp. 778-779). My initial assumptions were that workplaces in Denmark would be clearly more inclusive, for example, due to progressive legal frameworks. Through reflexivity I learned to listen more critically to everyday forms of exclusion and compliance that escaped my assumptions.

Further, through Dörfler & Stierand's (2020, pp. 781-783) notion of interpersonal reflexivity, interviews became contexts of co-constructed encounters, that is, spaces of mutual vulnerability and shared meaning-making. It is through iterative reflection and dialogue that meaning emerges relationally in qualitative research, rather than through detached observation. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself by name and pronouns and invited participants to share the pronouns they wished to use for the day, acknowledging the fluid relationship of gender and identification. I explained key theoretical terms, particularly heteroprofessionalism, a central concept in this study, and remained open to clarifying any

additional concepts that may have emerged during the discussion. In doing so, transparency, shared understanding, and intellectual agency by the participants were promoted.

By positioning myself not outside the research but ethically and critically within it, my aim was ultimately to make my subjectivity visible and accountable rather than to erase it altogether.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was designed with great care and sensitivity to methodological and epistemological perspectives, although several limitations emerged during the research process. These limitations shape the research in this scope, making it unique and able to contribute to the academic discourse. While the research limitations arising from contextual and personal shortcomings of the researcher and the limited thesis process are analyzed, they are identified more as alternative avenues for further research under other circumstances later on.

One of the major challenges faced was accessing an adequate pool of non-binary or gender non-conforming people working in corporate settings. Although visibility has increased in recent years, there is underrepresentation of such identities in the corporate sector, and individuals are often reluctant to disclose their gender identity due to fears of discrimination and professional repercussions. As a typical example, an older person, as mentioned in a personal message, while wishing to participate in the survey, expressed a strong fear of being identified by their work environment and insecurity about keeping their job. Therefore, recruitment was mainly based on personal networks as well as through public posts shared on Facebook groups and other social media platforms. While this approach was practical and facilitated access to participants, the sample remained small and sensitive from the researcher's personal reach. While this may have limited the demographic and empirical diversity of the sample, depth was prioritized over breadth, based on the principles of phenomenological research, while maintaining deeper rapport and ethical trust-building with the participants.

Focus groups could be used as a means of simultaneously seeking out experiences while dynamically empowering participants in the topic under study. Nevertheless, they were not used due to practical constraints such as time and difficulties in coordinating participants. Conducting a meaningful focus group would have required at least 3-4 sessions with the same group. However, the participants were located in different parts of Denmark, which made repeated group meetings logistically difficult. Although this choice limited the co-framing of the experience narrative to empowering community experience and observing the dynamic

shaping of management techniques, it allowed the researcher to focus in depth on the individual interviews, remaining consistent with the phenomenological emphasis on personal, situated, and embodied experience.

The initial focus of the study was a comparative perspective on three European countries, Greece, Denmark, and Germany, in order to highlight the common challenges and differences experienced by non-conforming people in different socio-political contexts. However, this was considered quite ambitious in the context of a thesis, since the social, legal, and professional differences were so great that a meaningful comparison risked becoming superficial or even misleading, especially between countries such as Greece and Denmark. Alternatively, there was the idea of creating a 'map of experiences' by collecting experiences from non-binary people in several European countries. Such an approach would require a much larger sample to be representative and access to different national contexts, which was not feasible in the specific time and scale of the research. While the focus is on the Danish context, somewhat limiting the generalizability of the results, future research could build on comparative surveys or more holistic research representing the experiences of gender non-conforming people in different geographical contexts.

Finally, focusing on the lived experiences of non-binary and gender non-conforming people in the workplace, the perspectives of corporate HR departments, management, and policy makers were not included. By resolutely maintaining a focus on the voice of the participants, the opportunity to analyze systemic dimensions of organizational inclusion, corporate norms and policies that affect the daily experience of the group under discussion was limited. Future work could include analyses that highlight dynamics that shape it at the organizational and institutional level.

PART III

Empirical analysis

Norms, Policies, and the Shaping of LGBTQ+ Labor Experiences

Historically, the systematic exclusion faced by LGBTQ+ workers has been described by numerous researchers, emphasizing the social exclusion and criminalization they experienced, forcing them to conceal their identity and imposing isolation in the workplace (Adam, 1987; Meyer, 2003). LGBTQ+ people faced with a significant psychological burden, like chronic stress, isolation, and internalized stigma, placed by these challenges (Adam, 1987).

The push for inclusivity gained momentum in the late 20th century, driven by civil rights, feminist, and LGBTQ+ movements, particularly in Western contexts. However, legislative changes, such as the decriminalization of homosexuality and the creation of anti-discrimination laws, initially brought about change by challenging exclusionary practices and providing LGBTQ+ individuals with legal recourse against discrimination. Yet, as laws began changing, societal views of LGBTQ+ employees themselves took more time, and discrimination continued as an ongoing problem in most industries (Ellis & Riggle, 1996).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, organizations began to rhetorically embrace diversity, presenting inclusion as morally and strategically beneficial, linking diversity to innovation and competitiveness (Cox & Blake, 1991). However, for queer employees, acceptance remained conditional, with studies reporting how LGBTQ+ employees had to suffer through microaggressions and the strong urge to either conform to traditional gender roles or to keep their sexual identity in the closet (Badgett, 1996; Badgett, 2001). Microaggressive behaviors, heteronormative norms, and institutional silence continued to shape everyday interactions.

By the 2010s, diversity promotion policies became more varied and structured, adopting anti-discrimination policies and proactive diversity and inclusion programs: employee resource groups, mentoring programs, and leadership training with an emphasis on LGBTQ+ inclusion. Although organizations are gradually recognizing the importance of these initiatives for recruiting and retaining the best talent (Shore et al., 2018), many of these policies continue to frame inclusion through a cisnormative lens. The underlying dynamics of exclusion remain, through informal rules and standards of 'professionalism' (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014), failing to incorporate the identities of trans and gender non-conforming employees (Schilt & Wiswall, 2008).

It is therefore clear that inclusion is understood as a continuous cultural and structural negotiation. The empirical analysis that follows is based on the lived experiences of the participants, exploring how inclusion is implemented and how gender expectations are intertwined with professional and social norms.

Rather than assuming that inclusion has been achieved, the following chapter brings to the surface the lived experiences of queer employees, revealing how inclusion is continuously negotiated and often unequally in everyday organizational life.

Embodied Queerness and Organizational Regulation

Following the phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), the analysis is based on semi-structured interviews that focus on personal narratives, without assuming coherence or completeness. The queer epistemological direction of the research rejects binary interpretations of gender and seeks to highlight the micropolitics of visibility, distancing, and the everyday negotiation of existence.

This chapter presents an empirical analysis of narratives collected through interviews with gender non-conforming people in work environments in Denmark. The participants identified themselves as gender non-conforming, with different relationships to visibility, gender, and professionalism. Rather than attempting to describe them in terms of socio-demographic categories, the focus is on aspects of their narratives that highlighted the positions from which they speak, i.e., their lived relationships with work, the body, performance, and (non)recognition.

The analysis is based on thematic coding and is structured around a set of theoretical tools that allow for the recognition of the political, performative, and cross-thematic nature of the queer experience in the workplace. Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study, the information provided here reflects specific insights rather than universal claims about queer experience.

The theoretical framework adopted combines the concepts of heteroprofessionalism (Mizzi, 2013), queer theories, especially that of gender performance (Butler, 1990), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and organizational sociology (Acker, 2006). The concept of heteroprofessionalism serves as a central analytical lens for examining how the seemingly 'neutral' standard of professionalism is constructed around cis, white-passing, heteronormative forms of subjectivity, thereby rejecting anything that deviates from this standard as 'unprofessional.' The narratives are not linear or fully coherent. On the contrary, they contain cracks, ambiguities, and shifting positions, reflecting the lived experience of queer discontinuity.

The structuring of themes is not a simple categorization but functions as a tool for highlighting the political nature of professional spaces and queer subjectivity within them. The empirical approach that follows does not treat participants as simple 'data' but as active political and performative subjects who negotiate (in)visibility, survival, and a sense of belonging. Accordingly, the thematic analysis is organized around five main analytical axes, examining how queer, gender non-conforming people negotiate gendered expectations, manage

(in)visibility and (mis)recognition, confront organizational silencing, and experience exclusion at the intersection of multiple social identities.

The choice of thematic analysis based on the queer theoretical framework recognizes that the voices of participants cannot be interpreted in terms of neutrality or objectivity. Instead, each narrative carries its own political weight, and the queer experience is treated as a dynamic performance of identity under conditions of constant surveillance, silencing, or rejection. The above themes do not function as rigid categories but as intertwined conceptual fields. Through them, an attempt is made to position queerness, not as an exception or a problem, but as a political subjectivity that carries a voice and creates a crack in the norms of the workplace.

Heteroprofessional norms and the regulation of gender

The concept of heteroprofessionalism (Mizzi, 2013) is used as key analytical tool for understanding how heteronormativity is inscribed in the rules of professional conduct and appearance. In this context, neutrality is not truly neutral but reflects the expectations of a cis, masculine, white-passing, heterosexual subject, who is presented as the normative standard of professionalism.

Participants described an environment in which queer expression was either restricted through formal rules or suppressed through informal mechanisms of surveillance and expectations. The employee's body and appearance thus become spaces of discipline.

The existence of formal or informal dress codes that impose an 'invisible' normality, typically stating that *"Most men were wearing suits and ties [...] women were wearing dresses and very well suited [...] you kind of conform to the standards they have."* as Participant E. states, is a very common subject in all of the interviews. This regulatory process of appearance leads to the indirect exclusion of any expression that does not conform to the binary and heteronormative professional image and is supported by the idea that *"...it was just basically like showing up in basic clothes like blue jeans and a white shirt."* as shown by Participant J. 'Purity' and 'correctness' are interpreted as neutrality, thus reproducing normative categories of gender and race (Acker, 2006).

However, even when there are no explicit rules, the appearance of queer bodies is subject to social control. As Participant E. explains, *"So many times I wore whatever I wanted at X*[13] *[...] but here where I live*[14] *[...] people will comment it on your face. On the street."* Professional environments silently impose gendered expectations regarding appearance. As the participant

[13] Participant reffers to a Danish Multinational Company.

[14] Participant means a relatively medium in size city of southeastern part of Jutland, Denmark.

in the first interview states, *"I generally wouldn't wear a dress, or I wouldn't wear cute shoes [...]. Like, it's a lot of... to fit in... in a specific way."* Adapting to the 'professional image' implies silent gender conformity. Constantly adapting to gender norms in the workplace gradually leads to a distortion of personal authenticity. As the same participant comments, *"I don't think anybody's ever their real authentic self in the workplace."* This phrase serves as a concise summary of the theory of soft power in the professional environment (Mizzi, 2013), where individuals are disciplined not through direct coercion but through the expectation that they will self-regulate their speech, appearance, and presence. Thus, authentic identity is not prohibited, but it becomes incompatible with the concept of 'normal professionalism.' Participant J. also points in this direction, stating that *"There was always, like, some sort of anxiety about the idea of wearing what I want [...] not because of the company rules but because of the way that I will be perceived."* The queer body is treated as 'unprofessional' when it does not conform to expected gender expressions. Butler (1990) has argued that gender is a performance under constant scrutiny. Thus, the professional performance of gender acquires a specific organizational framework, understanding that professionalism implies silencing difference. This suggests that professionalism dictates not only appearance but also imposes a politics of visibility that marginalizes queer identities and expressions.

The need to clarify gender in the workplace does not always stem from a desire for visibility but often from a fear of 'ambiguous reading.' As Participant E. explains, *"I've introduced myself as a trans woman everywhere I've worked [...] I don't like people seeing me as a question mark."* Visibility here functions as a strategy of performative normalisation, with the aim of limiting the social cost of an unrecognisable identity. However, even when gender expression is explicitly stated, it remains difficult to integrate.

"They definitely adapted more easily to the fact that I'm in office only twice a week than they had to the fact that I use they/them pronouns [...] They adapted to my disability much faster than to my gender," Participant K. describes emphatically.

Gender, especially its non-binary expression, continues to be 'uncomfortable' in environments that may otherwise have incorporated other forms of diversity. Thus, it remains the last frontier of tolerance and the main point of regulation by the rules of professionalism.

Even in well-meaning environments, the rules of gender normativity are not easily lifted, and the use of correct pronouns remains inconsistent. *"They try to use my pronouns. Some of them are better at it. Some of them are worse. But everyone is, you know, very open and welcoming.*

There's no judgment." explains Participant S. Thus, gender norms persistently resist change. However, genuine efforts toward recognition represent a crucial step and model for fostering a more inclusive daily existence.

The concept of 'cultural neutrality' functions as a mechanism of invisibilization. Performative compliance with professional norms is linked to the depoliticization of queer existence. Anything personal, gendered, or culturally different is dismissed as 'unprofessional.' Invisibility, therefore, becomes a condition for acceptance or, in some cases, survival in the professional arena. The seemingly neutral concept of professionalism conceals the fact that it functions as a regulatory mechanism. As Mizzi (2013) analyzes, professionalism is not only politically sterile, but often legitimizes heterosexist and homophobic[15] interpretations of policies, producing performative practices of exclusion. The normative expectation of 'correctness' is linked to the need to conceal or depoliticize queer existence, making professional identity potentially incompatible with visible queer expression.

In this way, heteroprofessionalism does not merely tolerate or reject expressions of queer culture but defines them, shaping the conditions under which they can become visible, understandable, or acceptable.

Negotiating visibility

Queer visibility in the workplace is not simply a matter of choice but the result of constant negotiation under conditions of security, power, and cultural surveillance. As queer theory has shown (Sedgwick, 1993; Warner, 1991), the (non)disclosure of identity is a deeply political act that cannot be separated from the context in which it takes place.

Participants described the disclosure or concealment of their identity as strategies that serve to protect them from stigmatization, rejection, or isolation. Even in environments that appear to be relatively accepting of diversity, there are frequent references to the difficulty of fully expressing one's identity, such as Participant E., who states that *"Most of the people that know me know that I am non-binary. [...] But it's difficult to explain to anyone, like, directly."*

Concealment becomes a tool for managing this "difficulty." Concealment here is not the result of guilt but a tool for managing identity for protection purposes. As Goffman (1963) argues, the presence of the "stigmatized" self within regulatory structures requires a constant 'game of

[15] "Discrimination towards, fear, marginalization and hatred of lesbian and gay people, or those who are perceived as lesbian or gay. Individuals, communities, policies and institutions can be homophobic" (UW Medicine, n.d.).

impressions,' as commented by Participant J. *"All the time I worked there, I didn't really feel I could be totally honest about myself. [...] I had maybe like to act a bit tough somehow."*
The difficulty of disclosure is not limited to the individual disposition of the employee but is shaped by the broader organizational environment. As Mejías Nihlén et al. (2025) argue, factors such as the work environment, the presence of LGBTQ+ colleagues, and access to safe spaces have a decisive influence on the experience and decision to disclose one's identity for trans and gender-diverse people. In addition, social pressure to 'pass' as cisgender and value conflicts regarding the importance of disclosure create contradictory conditions for managing queer performance in the workplace.
As is evident, silence is often not simply avoidance but a strategy for survival, since, according to Participant J., *"I couldn't really say anything because [...] I don't want to get into trouble with people."* Strategic silence reveals the deep internalization of insecurity in the workplace. In circumstances where disclosure can lead to social or even professional exclusion, the queer subject prefers an 'invisible' presence.
Queer performativity here cannot be analyzed in terms of simple binary patterns such as 'out'/'closeted' or 'comfort'/'fear.' Instead, in line with queer epistemology, which rejects static identities and focuses on the micropolitics of survival (Butler, 1990; Ahmed, 2006), it reveals a spectrum of shifting strategies that respond to micro-dynamics of power, security, and surveillance. As it appears, the disclosure of queer identity is not a fixed or absolute event but a dynamic process. The visibility of queer identity in the workplace seems to require constant performative work.

"People made a lot of effort at the beginning […] And then very slowly, they just stopped. I've been wearing a very big pin with my pronouns on every day that I'm at the office, I got nothing," notes Participant K.

Identity is not questioned, but passive non-recognition is provoked, with queer identity becoming 'normalized invisible.' The performative expression of identity here does not encounter strong resistance but rather an inert environment, presenting a heteronormative regulation through silence. However, even when visibility remains constant, as in the above example, gender continues to be read binarily through cultural criteria. *"I do constantly get introduced as a woman, so that doesn't help,"* says Participant K., showing how the environment's failure to interpret outside the binary reinforces the visible non-recognition of queer identity.

The experience of coming out as queer in the workplace is diverse and largely determined by social privilege, nationality, the ability to pass, and one's relationship to political exposure. As this research has shown, the decision to 'come out' as queer is never straightforward. It involves material, emotional, and symbolic risks, as Participant E. notes:

"I identify much more strongly as a trans woman [...] If I identify as non-binary [...], they'll struggle. [...] They won't know how to categorize me. What ends up happening there is that sometimes I then get put into the category of man, which I personally dislike."

Queer visibility brings not only fatigue but also responsibility. Being 'the queer person' in a space often means becoming an unofficial representative. As Participant T. expresses, *"I think it's a shame [...] that I should be the ambassador for queer people."* Here, visibility does not function as freedom but as the burden of representation. The person embodies the 'different,' becoming a symbol or channel of educational awareness for others. Showcasing another aspect of heteroprofessional pressure, identity functions not as a personal condition but as an example for analysis.

Self-presentation takes on the character of experimenting with boundaries, highlighting the negotiation between recognition and survival. *"Like between mixing both, between a man and a woman, I will do that [...] just to see where is the edge. When do they say stop?"* Participant E. mentions. Queer identity is present, but often in quotation marks or on hold. Visible but unnamed, political but unrecognized.

These practices can also be seen as forms of performative dis-identification. That is, as ways of avoiding recognition through fixed, normative categories. Rather than declaring a clear 'out' position or complete concealment, individuals choose ambiguity, humor, or shifting presences that destabilize expected identities (Muñoz, 1999, p. 6).

In contrast to the previous cases, there are environments where queer visibility does not require effort. As Participant S. describes:

"The guys already knew that I use they/them pronouns. They were like, 'Yeah, we know'."

This experience shows that acceptance of queer identity depends mainly on the receptiveness of the environment. Recognition does not need confirmation when there is an organizational or collective culture of understanding. This example can serve as a counterpoint to the other narratives, emphasizing that difficulty only arises when the environment fails to recognize or support queer identity and, by extension, visibility.

Belonging and (mis)recognition

Recognition is a key element in the formation of identity in the context of labor relations. The theory of performativity (Butler, 2004) emphasizes that gender and subjectivity do not pre-exist but are constructed through socially recognized acts. Lack of recognition or partial/misinterpreted recognition leads to the frustration of existence as a queer subject.

Empirical analysis shows that recognition is fluid, ambiguous, or even dangerous. Participants describe how visibility does not necessarily imply acceptance and how 'inclusion' is often accompanied by silent concessions.

In some cases, the work environment offered conditions of relative acceptance or no need for concealment. Participant E. points out *that "So many times I wore whatever I wanted at X.*[16]*. Used some kilts sometimes, different kind of clothing, different kind of shoes. [...] People were open. [...] There are many trans people working at X. and stuff like that."* However, these conditions are presented as exceptions rather than the norm. The possibility of meaningful belonging requires the presence of organizational frameworks that affirm and protect queer identity.

Cases of misidentification or, as seen in the case of Participant J., the imposition of heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality, such as *"They will assume that I'm a straight cisgender man at work. [...] Are you married, have kids."* is not simply a lack of information but normative rejection, partial, distorted or imposed forms of identity that deny the person' self-definition.

Similarly, in participants E. experience, it appears that the queer subject must 'correct' the perception of others or remain in the shadows, emphasizing that *"They pointed at me and looked at me and said, like, this is not working for us. [...] You yourself, you don't match the rest of us, so goodbye."*

Even in 'open' environments, participants state a lingering sense of otherness. Participant M reflects *that "They are very… nice, yes, but they fundamentally do not understand even just, yeah, I'm not that foreign, but I feel very foreign in that environment, kind of a thing."* Participant E. reinforces the idea of conditional inclusion by expressing that *"Even though they are very open to you as a society, as long as they are not like, have to be friends with you [...] suddenly things change."*

[16] Participant reffers to a Danish Multinational Company.

These narratives highlight forms of systemic non-recognition. These are not isolated incidents but a system that allows or even reinforces rejection. In the face of institutional absence, certain environments generate recognition through informal support networks. As Participant S. states *"I'm scared of the new manager […] What if they're gonna be like, transphobic[17]? […] And the guys were like, 'Don't worry, we're there for you'."* Recognition here is not a product of rules or policies, but of interpersonal trust. Companionship and the feeling of 'we'll get through this together' create space for queer belonging even within potentially hostile contexts. The example shows how community can act as a counterbalance to formal integration failure.

The non-acceptance of queer as a professional identity leads to a pervasive feeling that your position in the workplace is always conditional and remains contingent. This very fluid position in the workplace is highlighted by Participant T., who emphasizes that *"if I identify as non-binary, I find that people have a harder time categorizing me. [...] What ends up happening there is that sometimes I then get put into the category of man, which I personally dislike."*

The feeling of belonging does not always have to do with visibility or recognition. Sometimes, it has to do with the right to be unnoticed. *"I would like it to be more normal that I am the person that I am."* Participant K. emphasizes. The phrase embodies a deep existential longing. The need to exist without having to explain or defend oneself. It is not a spectacular demand but rather a form of everyday 'normality', where queer identity does not cause awkwardness or require constant management. It is a silent demand for substantive equality, not through approval, but through simple, effortless acceptance.

Silence, Surveillance and Organizational culture

Organizations do not simply function as neutral fields of work, but are structured through explicit and implicit rules that define what is acceptable, normal, and tolerable. As Joan Acker (2006) points out, organizational cultures are gendered and produce norms that serve to reproduce heteronormativity and whiteness as the 'neutral standard'. The queer voice, the gendered body, and cultural difference often come up against the imperative of silence, that is, to remain unseen, unheard, undisturbing to the illusion of normality.

Many participants described organizational environments in which queer presence had no place, either explicitly or symbolically. *"I don't feel like every company in Denmark is [18][...]*

[17] "Discrimination towards, fear, marginalization and hatred of transgender people or those perceived as transgender. Individuals, communities, policies and institutions can be transphobic" (UW Medicine, n.d.).

[18] Participant *means inclusive.*

Like for example at A.[19]*, you don't match the culture of the company,"* describes Participant E., where this exact queer presence was the reason for their dismissal. The phrase *"you don't match the culture"* functions as a euphemism for exclusion, concealing queer otherness behind ostensible organizational codes. This is a form of 'erasure' of queer existence from the organization as a system.

In many professional settings, queer subjects' compliance does not stem from explicit prohibitions but from silence and a lack of institutional provision for diversity. As Participant K. characteristically points out, *"I can tell that a lot of the issues that I face don't come from malice […] they're just very ignorant. And there is no space for them to learn."*

This statement reflects a situation of organizational inertia, where ignorance becomes a permanent state due to the lack of an institutional mechanism for understanding. There is no hostility, but neither is there any foresight, so the smooth professional integration of queer subjects is based on the personal cost of silence or adaptation.

This pattern is reinforced by their observation that *"I would like for companies to be more welcoming in a way that we know that this is a thing."*

"This is a thing" shows that queer identities are not taken for granted, are not articulated, are not named, and therefore do not exist in the institutional imagination. The silence here is not neutrality but a mechanism of invisible conformity, which excludes without admitting it and regulates identities through their linguistic erasure.

The feeling of erasure of queer presence does not equate to complete invisibility. Instead, an experience of "paradoxical (in)visibility" often emerges, as described by Davies and Neustifter (2023 p. 1037). Queer subjectivity becomes hyper-visible as a 'deviation' or spectacle, but remains invisible as a politically and professionally recognizable discourse. This condition reinforces the burden of emotional self-regulation, as the queer body struggles to survive in spaces that look at it without seeing it, or see it but do not recognize it.

"There also isn't a queer presence at least where I work anyway. [...] My team now has a second... Non-man? [...] So all the rest are men [...] Cis Danish men. [...] I'm not that foreign, but I feel very foreign in that environment," describes participant M. With the phrase *"I feel very foreign,"* vividly captures the paradox of (in)visibility. They are there, they are seen, but they are not really recognized. They experience a queer existence that becomes the subject of

[19] Participant *refers to a medium sized Danish company they have been working for a short period.*

gaze, but not necessarily of political or professional acceptance. The expected response to this paradoxical (in)visibility is emphatically encapsulated in Participant T. wish, describing how

"I wish I only brought attention to myself when I wanted to. [...] When I'm at work, I wish I could just kind of exist in a way where no one will see me as different from everyone else. [...] I could better [...] straddle that line [...] of like just fitting in when I want to just fit in and not have to think about what I look like [...]what people will see when they look at me."

Heteronormativity is not only enforced through rules but also through social dynamics such as glances, silences, and insinuations. *"So to avoid that, I'm kind of, you know, wearing what people want to see. So I make myself look like... normal pants, normal shoes [...] I don't feel like myself most of the time because of that,"* emphasizes Participant E. Queer expression takes on the character of a risky revelation and is treated as a threat to organizational 'calmness.'

Intersecting differences in the workplace

Gender and sexual identity intersect with other axes of otherness, like race, ethnicity and language, shaping the queer experience in the workplace. Intersectionality, as pointed out by Crenshaw (1991), is the experience of structured and inseparable exclusions produced by the interaction of power systems. In the second interview, the participant describes a queer identity that is not merely sexually or gender non-conforming but also carries racialized and cultural elements of difference:

"I was born in the Ukraine. My mom is Costa Rican, half Japanese and half Costa Rican. And my dad, he's Palestinian. [...] When I moved to Denmark, I came here with long hair, earrings and everything. And my dad was like, what is this? [...] because when you are a student, many people are very kind of open to you. [...] But then moving from there to starting on a job and having to behave differently, people begin to kind of behave differently towards you and you feel it."

The narrative reveals that queer bodies experience exclusion not only because of their non-normative gender expression, but also because they embody an intersectional otherness at linguistic, cultural, and racial levels. Acceptance is limited to the 'safe' university environment, while in the workplace, which functions as a field of normalization and surveillance, queer expression and the 'different' body become intolerable. Queer subjectivity, when intertwined

with additional deviations from the hegemonic white, cis, European norm, ceases to be tolerated and becomes a threat to organizational 'neutrality.'

Queer intersectional subjectivity becomes especially visible when confronted with ethnoculturally homogeneous work environments, as evidenced by the participant's experience in the first interview. Although the participant is European and white, they describe a sense of cultural displacement due to their queer identity, which "does not fit" into the narrowly masculine and politically conservative context of the work group:

"There also isn't a queer presence at least where I work anyway. [...] Cis Danish men. [...] They are very… nice yes but they fundamentally do not understand even just yeah, I'm not that foreign but I feel very foreign in that environment."

The phrase "I feel very foreign in that environment" suggests the experience of multiple non-belonging, even in spaces that may appear 'neutral' or 'tolerant' on the surface. The queer subject is excluded not only due to gender identity or sexuality, but also due to cultural differences, such as a language that is not shared, humor that is not understood or is perceived as offensive or as non-humor, or a lifestyle that is not recognized. The experience of difference is also amplified by other circumstances, such as physical condition. *"I have a chronic illness [...] I don't have to see people in the canteen if I don't want to."* says Participant K. The distance from the common dining area is not just a matter of 'choice.' They do not have to see 'the others,' but no one has to see them either. This sums up how the queer experience at work can become a web of silence, avoidance, and survival through seemingly 'neutral' arrangements. This is a form of exclusion that is not explicitly stated but is implied through silences, glances, and omissions, suggesting that only if you are to some extent similar to the majority can you 'be yourself.'

Reflections on Situated Knowledge and Queer Positionality

Rejecting neutrality, linear narration, and a universal understanding of experiences, this study adopts a methodological perspective in which narratives shape reality through dialogue. In line with the principles of queer theory, traditional forms of knowledge are criticized.

My positionionality as a queer neurodivergent researcher influenced not only the way the data was collected but also the form of presenting the analysis. The experiences presented through the participant narratives underscore queer existence in the workplace as a continuous act of

negotiation. The narratives reflect a balance between the need of survival and the need for visibility, countering the idea of "coming out" as a once and for all act.

The concept of heteroprofessionalism (Mizzi, 2013) emerges as a useful lens for understanding how organizations are not neutral but produce and reproduce normative standards that favor specific identities. At the same time, the theories of performativity (Butler, 1990) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) help to show that queer subjectivity is always a function of cultural, gender, racial, and class contexts.

Through the themes of disclosure, silence, non-recognition, and intersecting exclusions, a common theme emerges. Queer professional subjectivity is not simply different but rather normatively precarious. It doesn't come pre-existing the framework but is constructed within it through small, often invisible strategies such as silence, distancing, overachievement, adaptation, and withdrawal.

Politics of (In)Visibility and the Professional Norms

Examining narrative through the theoretical lens of performativity and heteroprofessionalism, reveals how queer employees are forced to 'play' a role that appears depoliticized, sufficiently neutral, and without "disturbing" identity connotations.

The concept of performativity (Butler, 1990) is revealed here as a mechanism of power rather than a simple space for self-expression. The body, the voice, the clothes, and the way an employee is seated at their desk become performative acts of survival or erasure. As the interviews also showed, visibility is always conditional, always negotiable, and never completely secure. In the Danish context, where progressive labor policies coexist with tacit professional expectations, non-binary visibility is often tolerated only when it does not challenge dominant norms, reinforcing a politics of conditional inclusion.

The theory of heteroprofessionalism (Mizzi, 2013; Davies & Neustifter, 2023) offers a critical conceptual tool that shows that the "neutral" concept of professionalism is already gendered, racially determined, and politically charged. Queer employees are either assimilated or placed outside the framework. Not because of their performance, but because of their performative non-conformity with the hegemonic professional norm. To further complicate this framework, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) reveals that the queer work experience is not uniform or homogeneous, but is constructed at the intersection of gender, race, class, linguistic context, and neurodivergent embodied experience, intensifying or transforming forms of precariousness and exclusion.

Grounded in these frameworks, the queer perspective that informs this study avoids pathologization. It does not approach experiences as 'problems,' but as signs of resistance, inventiveness, and political agency. As Ahmed (2006) comments, queer presence does not simply seek acceptance, but "distorts" spaces, introduces discomfort, opens cracks, and shifts normality.

This finding corresponds to the concept of paradoxical (in)visibility (Davies & Neustifter, 2013), which describes how queer bodies become simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. The queer subject is present and observable, yet depoliticized, ignored, or misinterpreted. In this context, visibility is exposure rather than acceptance and redemption. Through fluid performative strategies, queer subjectivity in the workplace does not precede the framework but is shaped within it, as the analysis has shown. This highlights not only deviations from "professional normality," but also points where it becomes apparent that this 'normality' is a normative construct.

Regulatory professional codes emerged as mechanisms of compliance, where 'neutrality' functions as a heteronormative standard. The disclosure and concealment of identity appeared not as a binary act but as a continuous performance in conditions of security and insecurity. The claim for recognition was reflected as a need for confirmation but also as an act of political presence. The silence of organizational culture functions as a tool of invisibility, embedded in everyday life. Together, these five themes reflect points of intersection where theory becomes grounded in experience.

This study contributes to the research field in two distinct ways. First, it employs the concept of heteroprofessionalism as a tool for interpreting everyday work experiences in a European context that remains underexplored. Second, it moves the discussion beyond pathologizing queer experience and toward the dynamics of invention, resilience, and knowledge produced by gendered bodies themselves.

Towards a Queer Politics of Work

This study began with the question: How do queer/gender non-conforming people manage the negotiation of their identity in corporate work environments in Denmark? The findings indicate that this management is neither static nor 'strategic' in the conventional sense, but rather a constant, performative bargain between survival, visibility, protection, and silence. Through narratives of small acts, the queer subject emerges not as a deviation, but as a revealing indicator of the limits of professional normality. Although Denmark is often considered a

model of progressiveness when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusion, this research reveals the subtle but persistent mechanisms of discipline that regulate non-normative gender expressions in the professional environment. This national context provides an interesting field for imagining queer interventions in organizational life.

Like all research, this thesis is bounded by certain limitations. The focus on Denmark, the use of English-language online interviews, and the absence of institutional voices such as HR or policy documents inevitably shape the scope and depth of the analysis. These choices, while intentional and practical, may limit the cultural nuance or complexity of expression in participants' narratives. Yet, queer experience is inherently partial, situated, and ever-evolving, no study can claim universality. What this project offers is an empirically informed contribution to understanding the situated realities of queer identity negotiation and existence at work.

Future research could focus on comparative approaches to heteroprofessionalism in different European contexts, exploring the differences that emerge from changing cultural, legal, and employment realities. At the same time, it is crucial to study collective forms of queer organization and solidarity in the workplace, as well as to emphasize queer performativity as it intersects with disability, neurodivergent embodied experience, or linguistic code. Such directions can deepen the interdisciplinary understanding of queer work experiences and expand their theoretical and political resonance.

Queer embodied experiences are not monolithic, but rather, they are radically differentiated through their intersection with cultural, racial, linguistic, age, and disability contexts. As Audre Lorde (1984, p. 138) points out, *"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives."* Lorde's approach serves as a reminder that embodied experience is always racially, culturally, and historically situated, and therefore every queer narrative contains aspects of invisibility, overrepresentation, or silence that are connected to the intersection of these positions.

At the same time, Jasbir Puar (2007, pp. 9–12) criticizes the institutional notion of "inclusion" as a neutral act, showing that intersectionality is often used as a tool for managing difference rather than deconstructing normative structures. From this perspective, queer/trans subjectivity is not only experienced as multiple or complex but often also as disciplined through the normalization of specific "acceptable" ways of being visible, especially if your body does not conform to white, able-bodied, heteronormative standards.

A queer feminist approach must seek out these multiple positions not simply as "variations" but as critical points of reading precariousness, survival, and silent resistance. Any future

research direction that seeks to capture the full range of queer work experiences must take into account not only gender and sexuality, but also the material, linguistic, racial, and cultural bodies that embody them.

The question remains: how can we redefine the concept of "professional credibility" through queer experiences? Not to adapt it, but to deconstruct it.

Ultimately, queer presence in the workplace does not simply demand "inclusion" but requires a re-examination of the very terms of existence of the "normal professional." Conditional acceptance is not acceptance, but rather, management. Queer labor, as performance, as questioning, as embodied ambiguity, has the power to destabilize the root of heteroprofessionalism. The question that remains is, what does it mean to create spaces where you don't have to prove your worth before you are allowed to exist?

Returning to the questions that shaped this study, the findings correspond to key theoretical debates and offer an evidence-based perspective on how gender, power, and professionalism interact in practice.

By revisiting the literature on queer theory, organizational norms, and heteroprofessionalism, this study contributes to illustrating how these frameworks are actually manifested in the experiences of employees in Danish corporate settings. At the same time, it presents ways in which gender non-conforming people navigate such environments, managing to remain and striving for visibility.

It became apparent in this study that professionalism maintains heteronormative structural systems. In such a work reality, queer presence exposes and disrupts organizational norms, revealing areas where everyday practice can be improved. By showing that recognition is relational, precarious, and socio- politically charged, it becomes evident that, ultimately, queer identity does not simply demand space to function. Instead, it claims the right to exist fully with contradictions, fluidity, and embodied knowledge. Not as a problem, but as a form of knowledge.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Working title: Navigating Heteroprofessionalism in Danish workplace
Focus: Gender non comforming people (non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid) and their strategies for navigating heteroprofessional norms.
Keywords: Denmark, strategies, performance, workplace norms, agency, visibility, inclusion

INTRODUCTION (5-7 MIN)

Scope of the research: examines how gender non-comforming people experience and manage what we call 'heteroprofessionalism'

Interview Content: We will discuss your experiences with these norms
- How you have experienced them in your workplace
- How they may relate to other aspects of your identity
- What strategies you have used to adapt to, avoid, or challenge them

Procedure
- No right or wrong answers. I am here to listen and learn from your personal experience.
- If at any time you want to pause, have me rephrase something, or ask a question, you are welcome to do so.

Participants' intro:
- Would you like to introduce yourself a little (remind anonymity)
- What pronouns you use / how you indentify?
- Were do you live/ work / what is your nationality?

Key Terms: Heteroprofessionalism refers to the way workplace norms and professional standards are shaped by heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions. It describes how queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people are implicitly or explicitly expected to conform to binary gender roles and heterosexual norms in order to be seen as 'professional.'

a. Workplace Context (10–15 min)

Question 1:
- Can you describe your workplace?
  - Any formal rules/ policies or unwritten gender expectations (dress codes, use of pronouns, toilets.)

Question 2:
- Have you ever had to report something to HR or a superior about discrimination?
  - Do you feel protected by HR in such cases?

b. Navigating Heteroprofessionalism (20–25 min)

Question 3:
- How do you express your gender identity at work?
  - Did you had to adjust your expression to fit in or exist in your workplace?

Interview Guide

Question 4: - How do people address you in the workplace?
  - How do you present yourself at work?
  - Would you say that your gender expression or your queerness is visible in your current workplace?
  - Is this something that you try to hide?

Question 5: - Do you feel that your gender identity affects how you're expected to perform at work?
  - Have you ever experienced being misgendered or treated differently due to your gender identity or expression?
  - Do you think that being a gender non-conforming person affects your chances of professional growth?

Question 6: - How does it feel for you to be a gender non-conforming person in a professional environment?
  - Have you ever felt that you had to overperform in order to be respected?

Question 7: - How do you experience relationships with colleagues?

c. Strategies & Agency (15–20 min)

Question 8: - Are there people at work with whom you feel you can be yourself?

Question 9: - What strategies do you use to thrive as a person in your work?
  - What strategies you follow to be/not to be visible?

d. Intersectionality (10–15 minutes)

Question 10: - Does other aspects of your identity shape your experience?

Question 11: - If you've worked outside Denmark, how do gender norms differ there?

e. Ideal workplace (5–10 min)

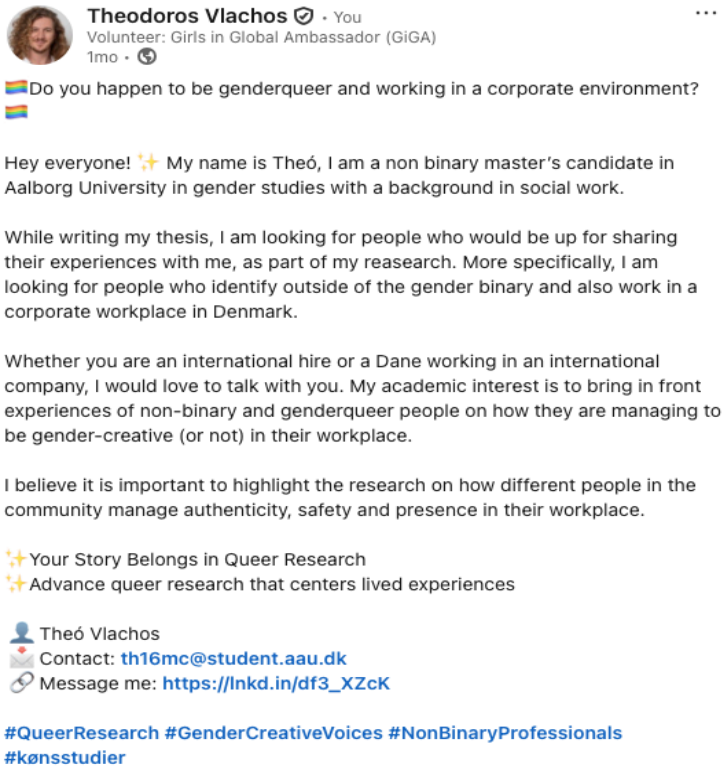
Question 12: - What changes would make to your workplace to feel included/ creative/ free to be who you are?
  - As it is now, do you feel that you belong in your workplace?

f. Closing (5 minutes)

Debrief: - Is there anything we haven't covered and you think it is important?

Appendix B

Interview Invitations



Theodoros Vlachos · You
Volunteer: Girls in Global Ambassador (GiGA)
1mo ·

🏳️‍🌈Do you happen to be genderqueer and working in a corporate environment?
🏳️‍🌈

Hey everyone! ✨ My name is Theó, I am a non binary master's candidate in Aalborg University in gender studies with a background in social work.

While writing my thesis, I am looking for people who would be up for sharing their experiences with me, as part of my reasearch. More specifically, I am looking for people who identify outside of the gender binary and also work in a corporate workplace in Denmark.

Whether you are an international hire or a Dane working in an international company, I would love to talk with you. My academic interest is to bring in front experiences of non-binary and genderqueer people on how they are managing to be gender-creative (or not) in their workplace.

I believe it is important to highlight the research on how different people in the community manage authenticity, safety and presence in their workplace.

✨Your Story Belongs in Queer Research
✨Advance queer research that centers lived experiences

👤 Theó Vlachos
📩 Contact: th16mc@student.aau.dk
🔗 Message me: https://lnkd.in/df3_XZcK

#QueerResearch #GenderCreativeVoices #NonBinaryProfessionals
#kønsstudier

🔍 SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

Gender-Creative

Professionals in Danish Corporate Workplaces

Who are you?

✅ Non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid professionals
✅ Working in multinational companies in Denmark
✅ Comfortable sharing in English

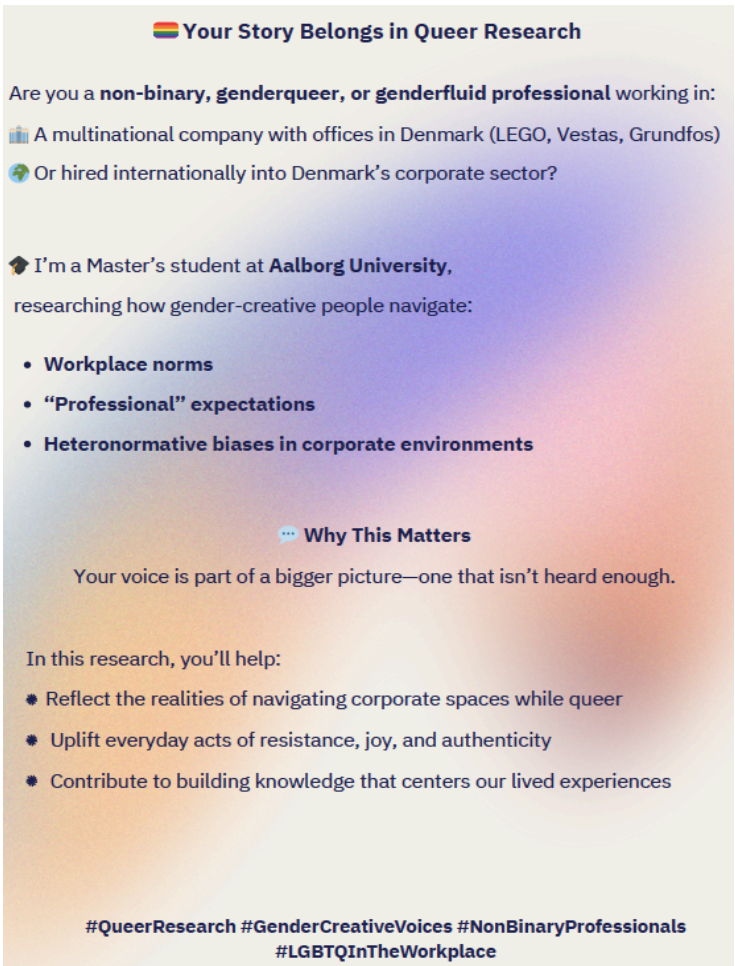
Why Participate?

💬 Share your story in a 60-min confidential interview
🎓 Take part in queer research on corporate cultures
💡 Help advocate for inclusive policies

Contact

👤 Theó Vlachos
📩 th16mc@student.aau.dk
🔗 linkedin.com/in/theodore-vlachos

AALBORG UNIVERSITY



🏳️‍🌈 Your Story Belongs in Queer Research

Are you a **non-binary, genderqueer, or genderfluid professional** working in:

🏢 A multinational company with offices in Denmark (LEGO, Vestas, Grundfos)
🌍 Or hired internationally into Denmark's corporate sector?

🎓 I'm a Master's student at **Aalborg University**,
researching how gender-creative people navigate:

- **Workplace norms**
- **"Professional" expectations**
- **Heteronormative biases in corporate environments**

💬 Why This Matters

Your voice is part of a bigger picture—one that isn't heard enough.

In this research, you'll help:

- Reflect the realities of navigating corporate spaces while queer
- Uplift everyday acts of resistance, joy, and authenticity
- Contribute to building knowledge that centers our lived experiences

#QueerResearch #GenderCreativeVoices #NonBinaryProfessionals
#LGBTQInTheWorkplace

Appendix C

Consent Form

Consent Form

Research title:
Navigating Heteroprofessionalism: Gender-Creative Professionals in Danish International work environments

Researcher: Vlachos Theodoros (they/them)

Institute: Master's Candidate in International Relations (Global Gender Studies), Aalborg University

Scope of research:

This study investigates how **non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid or any other gender non conforming/ gender-creative professionals** experience and navigate *heteroprofessional norms*—unspoken workplace rules privileging cisgender/heteronormative behaviors—in Danish multinational corporations or international hire in Denmark's corporate sector.

* Indicates required question

Email *

Your email

Procedure:
Participants will take part in a semi-structured interview with the researcher that lasts approximately sixty minutes. The interview will be recorded, and the information gathered will only be utilized for this study.

Participants must know that:

- Participation in the research is entirely voluntary.
- Participants are free to leave the interview at any moment without facing any repercussions.
- All information will be kept completely private and confidential.
- The interview's findings could be released, but not with the participants' private details disclosed.

Consent: *

☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the information above by signing below. I willingly consent to take part in this study.

Date: *

Date

dd/mm/yyyy

Next Page 1 of 2 Clear form

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Demographics (Anonymous)

Your answers help provide context to the research while keeping your identity fully anonymous.

Age *

Your answer

Gender Identity *
How do you describe your gender identity currently?

Your answer

Pronouns
What pronouns do you prefer to be used?

Your answer

Nationality *
Country of origin/Nationality

Your answer

Country of Residence *

Your answer

Professional infomation

Country of work *
What country do you currently work in?

Your answer

Current job title or role *

Your answer

Industry/Sector *
What industry or field do you work in?

Your answer

Length of time in current role

- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1 - 3 years
- ☐ 3 - 5
- ☐ Over 5 years

Type of company *

- ☐ Danish company
- ☐ International company headquartered in Denmark
- ☐ Multinational company (HQ elsewhere)
- ☐ Other:

Work setting *

- ☐ Fully in-office
- ☐ Hybrid
- ☐ Fully remore
- ☐ Other:

Company size (approximate)

O 1 - 10 employees O 10 - 50
O 50 - 200 O 200 - 1000
O 1000+
O Other:

Your time, experiences, and insights are highly valued. I sincerely appreciate your participation and contribution to this important research.

Appendix D

Interview Transcriptions sample

this is also in terms of my gender expression, that kind of thing, I wish I only brought attention to myself when I wanted to.

I sometimes, especially when I identify more as a fag, I like attention, I like dressing up, like wearing glitter and skimpy outfits and that kind of thing. That's very empowering for me. But when I'm at work, I wish I could just kind of... kind of exist in a way where no one will see me as different from everyone else. And I feel like they don't generally, but there are a few things that I wish were different so that I could better... how do you say, better straddle that line basically of like just fitting in when I want to just fit in and not have to think about what I look like and if something is visible or what people will see when they look at me when I'm in that state of mind and then choosing to, to get the attention when I want to get that attention usually when I'm not at work or exclusively when I'm not at work.

Interviewer (26:56) So what were the things that would make you feel less.. is these things that you have been describing that the tallness the height the hairline, things like that

Participant● (21:30) I mean... It was a very binary workplace. There was no place to talk about sexuality or gender or anything, especially because some people or many of the people who work there have a very conservative background. So it was not a thing that people usually talk about. So there was no talk about it.

And also like, I don't know, didn't feel like it was the time and place to talk about sexuality there, you know. Again, because of people like with different backgrounds and some of them like was very conservative backgrounds. Yeah.

Interviewer (21:58) Yeah, I can imagine places like that, to be honest. So, how did you introduce yourself there?

Participant● (22:47) You know, like all the time I worked there I didn't really feel I could like totally be honest about myself. So I just like said my name and I had maybe like to act a bit

or as using multiple pronouns instead of right?

Participant● (26:26) There also isn't a queer presence at least where I work anyway. I worked in the office on the [redacted]. So, I have one other non-team, a co-worker, , two actually, sorry

Well...My team now has a second.... Non-man? Non-man? I guess, no, their name is [redacted], but that means on my team of 11 there's now two of us who are non-men, you know? So all the rest are men Yeah, in their 40s or 50s, who... mostly engineers mostly, you know, it's very much like that.

Interviewer (27:27) Yeah, so we're basically talking for... the plurality as we can presume, men, middle-aged, cis men...

Participant● (27:46) Cis Danish men. Just being sure that we're having the full list of... they are From [redacted] also, which is a bit more specific and a bit more... Yeah,

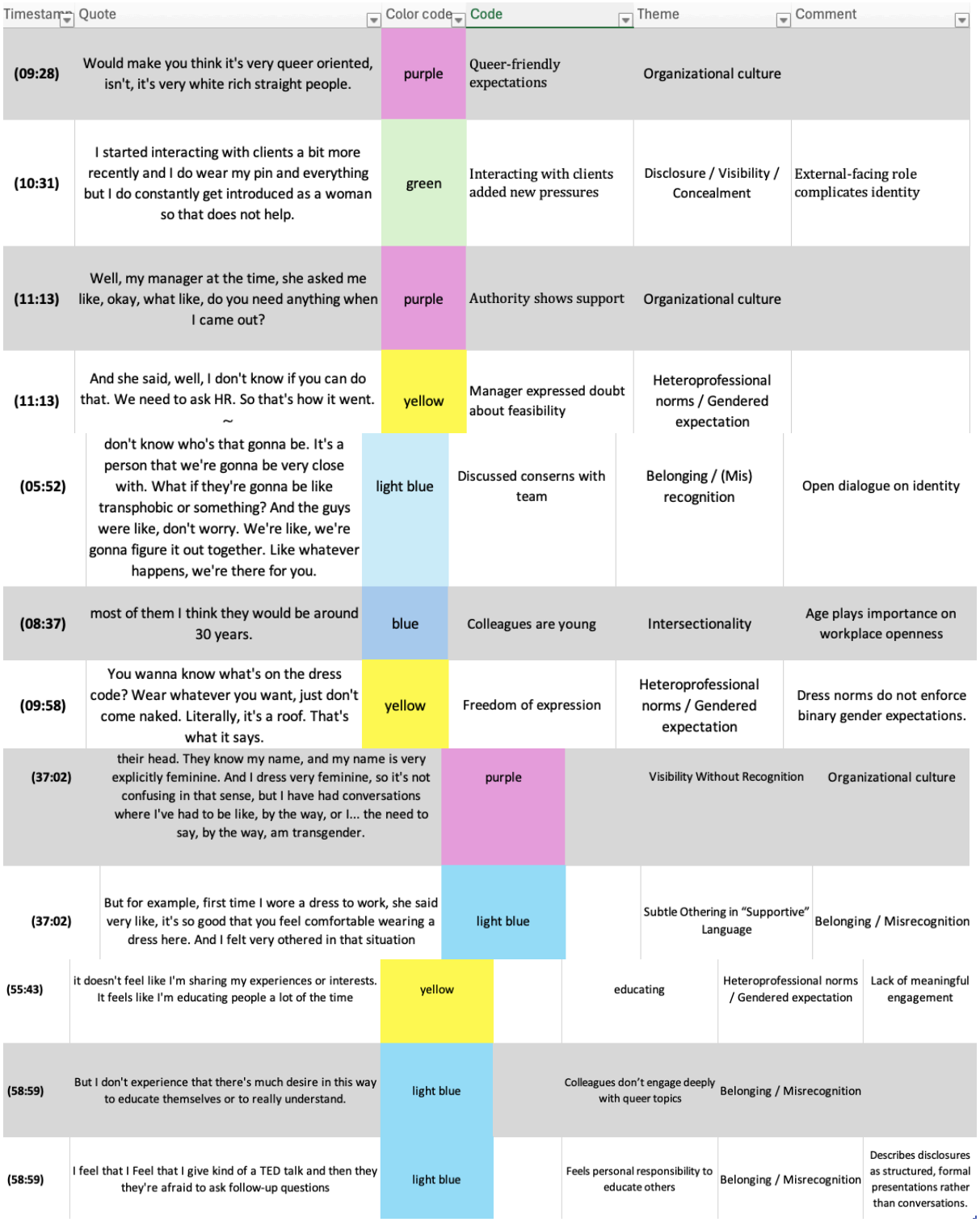
They are very... nice yes but they just do not they fundamentally do not understand even just yeah, I'm not that foreign but I feel very foreign in that environment kind of a thing.

Note: This represents only a portion of the complete 85-page document, uploaded individually

See file 'Appendix D_ Interview Transcriptions merged.pdf' for all interviews.

Appendix E

Coding sample



Timestamp	Quote	Color code	Code	Theme	Comment
(09:28)	Would make you think it's very queer oriented, isn't, it's very white rich straight people.	purple	Queer-friendly expectations	Organizational culture	
(10:31)	I started interacting with clients a bit more recently and I do wear my pin and everything but I do constantly get introduced as a woman so that does not help.	green	Interacting with clients added new pressures	Disclosure / Visibility / Concealment	External-facing role complicates identity
(11:13)	Well, my manager at the time, she asked me like, okay, what like, do you need anything when I came out?	purple	Authority shows support	Organizational culture	
(11:13)	And she said, well, I don't know if you can do that. We need to ask HR. So that's how it went. ~	yellow	Manager expressed doubt about feasibility	Heteroprofessional norms / Gendered expectation	
(05:52)	don't know who's that gonna be. It's a person that we're gonna be very close with. What if they're gonna be like transphobic or something? And the guys were like, don't worry. We're like, we're gonna figure it out together. Like whatever happens, we're there for you.	light blue	Discussed conserns with team	Belonging / (Mis) recognition	Open dialogue on identity
(08:37)	most of them I think they would be around 30 years.	blue	Colleagues are young	Intersectionality	Age plays importance on workplace openness
(09:58)	You wanna know what's on the dress code? Wear whatever you want, just don't come naked. Literally, it's a roof. That's what it says.	yellow	Freedom of expression	Heteroprofessional norms / Gendered expectation	Dress norms do not enforce binary gender expectations.
(37:02)	their head. They know my name, and my name is very explicitly feminine. And I dress very feminine, so it's not confusing in that sense, but I have had conversations where I've had to be like, by the way, or I... the need to say, by the way, am transgender.	purple		Visibility Without Recognition	Organizational culture
(37:02)	But for example, first time I wore a dress to work, she said very like, it's so good that you feel comfortable wearing a dress here. And I felt very othered in that situation	light blue		Subtle Othering in "Supportive" Language	Belonging / Misrecognition
(55:43)	it doesn't feel like I'm sharing my experiences or interests. It feels like I'm educating people a lot of the time	yellow	educating	Heteroprofessional norms / Gendered expectation	Lack of meaningful engagement
(58:59)	But I don't experience that there's much desire in this way to educate themselves or to really understand.	light blue	Colleagues don't engage deeply with queer topics	Belonging / Misrecognition	
(58:59)	I feel that I Feel that I give kind of a TED talk and then they they're afraid to ask follow-up questions	light blue	Feels personal responsibility to educate others	Belonging / Misrecognition	Describes disclosures as structured, formal presentations rather than conversations.

Note: This represents only a portion of the complete coding document, uploaded individually

See file 'Appendix E_ Coding.xlsx' for the full coding.