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Living gender in diverse times

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Introduction

The project: background and questions

This Special Issue emerges from the editors' project 'Living Gender in Diverse Times: Young People's Understandings and Practices of Gender in the Contemporary UK', which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (2017–2021). The project explored what gender means to young people, how gender is practiced by different groups of young people, and how these intersect with structural forces, such as education, work, other social categories, such as race and class, and social relations, such as family and friendship networks. We also considered the role of culture, and media consumption and production on, gendered meanings, practices and expressions, especially that of social media. The project's qualitative data was collected from focus groups with 136 young people (aged 16–24) across the UK, 42 in-depth individual interviews and multi-media diaries with 5 interviewees.

The project was set within a rapidly changing UK landscape regarding gender diversity. Following a dramatic rise in the cultural visibility of people who identify across, between or beyond the categories of male and female, 'Time Magazine' heralded a 'Transgender tipping point' in 2014 (Time 2014). A year later, 2015 was declared as 'The Year of Transgender' by media sources in the UK and US (BBC News, CNN News). Correspondingly, provision for the equality of transgender people has emerged on the political agenda in many western countries, which, over the last decade, have witnessed increased social awareness of gender diversity and moves towards greater legal protection for the citizenship rights of gender diverse people (and those of sexual minorities) (Hines, 2013; 2016). Against this backdrop, significant cultural commentary has been given to the wider ramifications of the 'Year of Transgender' on young people generally. For example, media reports in the UK and US regularly declare that the millennial generation – or Generation Y and Z- are rejecting traditional gender labels and norms (Guardian 2016; Teen Vogue 2016) and endorsements of non-binary gendered identity by celebrities such as Sam Smith are presented as emblematic of this shift. While this may suggest that traditional gender identities and expressions are being less rigidly experienced by young people in contemporary society, there is, conversely, evidence of how young people's ways of 'doing gender' are constrained by power relations and the circulation of gendered norms within educational institutions, families, and peer groups. Alongside the continued prevalence of transphobia within UK society and continued challenges to gender diverse inclusive education and the provision of health care for young gender diverse people, this suggests that celebratory declarations of a shift in how young people understand and practice gender demands caution and much further exploration. This Special Issue speaks to such tensions and its contributions investigate a complex contemporary gender landscape in the UK.

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Findings

Our research findings point to the importance of generation in the ways in which gender and sex are understood. Young people were more likely to understand gender in terms of identity, practice and expression, rather than in relation to social roles. For the young people we spoke to in interviews and focus groups, gender was a category and a practice that was diverse and open to flux. Overall, participants were optimistic about gender diverse futures, positioning a gender trajectory of progress – a 'world we have won' (Weeks, 2007). Yet the cultural visibility and seeming acceptance of gender diversity sits simultaneously alongside resurgent anti-feminism and misogyny on the Right, and also gender critical feminism; and young people's talk is located in the confluence of these currents

Diversity in relation to sexuality was overwhelming viewed in positive terms by participants and societal acceptance of, and citizenship rights for, gay, lesbian and bisexual people, are largely considered a fait accompli. These are, after all, young people who were educated post Section 28, and for whom the legalization of same-sex civil unions and now marriage is somewhat normalized. Sexuality was drawn upon in imagining a future where gender diversity would be similarly recognized, and, in this way, young people constructed a teleological narrative of progress. But while there was a overall sense of optimism, in some accounts this narrative was ruptured as gender diversity was conceptualized as stickier, more difficult, than sexuality. This was generally down to its imagined complexity – and with it, the imagined difficulties in understanding it. The complexities of understanding gender diversity were linked to a lack – indeed a failure – of education. Our cis participants spoke of confusions and misunderstandings and stressed the importance of educational provision around gender diversity. Many participants were reflexive about their lack of knowledge and stressed the necessity of improved education. Incorporating teaching about gender diversity in the curriculum was seen not only to be a good idea but a necessary one. In the absence of formal educational provision, on-line spaces were seen to be essential– a vital source of support and community for trans and non-binary young people and a key site of education for those who were cis.

These young people held a significant level of awareness of the privileges afforded to cis people in society and of the impacts of sexism/patriarchyyet there was much ambivalence about claiming a feminist identity. The endurance of gendered inequalities, however, was clear. Particularly striking was the prevalence of street harassment and objectification of young women. Here we found that participants had sophisticated critiques of masculinity and while they might not have used the identity of feminist, they were clear about the power imbalances between men and women as well as the structural inequalities between cis and trans people.

The articles

In 2021 we held a conference where we presented the project findings to academics working in the areas of gender diversity and youth studies and to practitioners who work with young people across a range of settings – youth work, education, social work and health. Following the conference, we put out an open call for papers for a Special Issue exploring the diversity of gendered experiences and practices amongst young people. The articles that follow have been developed from conference presentations and the open call for papers.

The first article 'Young people's digitally networked bodies: the changing possibilities of what a gendered body can be, do and become online' by Kate Marston draws on data from creative and visual group interviews LGBTQ+ young people aged 15–18 years old in the South Wales valleys. The article explores the gendered experiences of the body online. Participants talk of an intensification of commodified gendered and sexualized norms online, highlighting an intrusion of idealized bodies and abusive body-shaming. Yet they also talked of the embodied pleasures of online culture, particularly in relation to food and pets. Inspired by feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship, this paper examines how food and pet photography plugs into masculinizing and

feminizing bodily assemblages. In so doing, it not only makes an empirical contribution to the field of gender studies, but also offers a contribution to the methodological literature by developing a theoretically informed approach, which expands the boundaries of what a gendered body may be, do and become online.

The second article also looks at online culture. 'Navigating visibility and risk: disabled young women's self-presentation practices on social media by Sarah Hill examines how disabled young women represent themselves on social media as part of their everyday practices. Using a combination of discursive textual analysis of Twitter and Instagram accounts and semi-structured interviews with disabled young women, the article considers how affordances such as Twitter retweets play a key role in how disabled young women navigate their visibility online as part of their self-presentation practices. Visibility is potentially risky, the article suggests, and disabled young women's social media use is shaped by concerns about harassment and questions about the 'legitimacy' of their disabled identities that operate at the intersections of gender, disability and race, stemming from their experiences of 'systemic disbelief'. The article considers these self-representation practices within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third article additionally considers online spaces in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In '"Bois of isolation": queering place, gender binaries and the 'self' through selfies in pandemic lockdown', Anna Davidson and Dawn Wooley consider what happens to queer and gender-non-conforming community, bodily expression and identity when many queer spaces are closed and communities move to online spaces? The article reflects on a collaborative project 'bois of isolation (boi)' – a platform within Instagram for people to share selfies of the spaces and processes through which they queer gender binaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article considers the extent to which online social media spaces can disrupt normative, binarized gender identity and provide ways of reimagining the selfie, and suggests that in queering the visual representations of binarized gender and questioning the neoliberal individualized 'self' in 'selfies', young people construct communal aesthetic spaces in which gender plurality and fluidity are expressed and celebrated.

The cultural remaking of gender carries through to the fourth article by Benjamin Hanckel and Adam Shepherd. 'Representations of gender categorizations: examining the ways that young people (re)curate gender in an urban science art gallery' examines the representations of gender that emerged in one urban site: a science gallery exhibition in London that sought to de-centre fixed binary gender categories – a site where gender is explicitly being 'redone'. Drawing on research work on curation the article examines young people's drawings and text, exploring the ways gender is narrativised and re-curated within the physical and discursive space(s) of the gallery. Findings show the ways that gender was felt and represented in these recurations, as both fixed and unfixed, and as productive and unproductive. These re-curations, the article argues, point to the ways that young people make sense of gender (im)possibilities and highlight the complex ways in which young people are grappling with discourses of gender as they transition into adulthood in contemporary society.

The fifth article focuses on practices and expressions of masculinity on social media. In 'Logging in: A study on how young transgender men use Facebook to navigate masculinity', Robin Todd explores the ways in which trans men subvert the platform's prohibition of identity-multiplicity and activate a version of themselves that is oftern kept secret from their main followers. The article uses virtual ethnography alongside qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 transgender men to consider the extent to which Facebook is a successful tool for constructing, rehearsing and navigating (trans)masculinity.

Practices of masculinity are also under focus in the sixth and seventh articles. 'Men have to be competent in something, women need to show their bodies: gender, digital youth cultures and popularity, by Manolo Farci and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, explores how the ideal of entrepreneurialism, which marks the social media logic of attention and visibility, is appropriated by young people in ways that allow them to challenge or reaffirm traditional gender and sexual norms. The article draws on research with young people in Italian schools to consider how young people discursively construct gender and sexual norms through dominant cultural discourses of gender and

heteronormativity. Young people's discourse, the article, suggests, focuses on the apparent feminization of the internet and a perception of social media platforms as belonging to the female sphere, which leads to men's need to link technical competence, professionalism, and masculinity in order to reproduce the stereotypical portrayal of women as bearers of an innate sexual power that compensates for their perceived lack of digital skills.

In 'Boy cuts: female masculinity and queer aesthetics in Karachi, Pakistan, Hafsa Arain considers how trans men, butch women, and nonbinary people assigned female at birth navigate public spaces, negotiate identity and aesthetic expression of gender, and balance the globalizing LGBTQ+ discourses with pre-existing South Asian forms of queerness in Karachi. The article examines embodied choices such as hair styles and clothing, as central to the ways in which masculine-presenting queer and trans young adults express their gender. Their aesthetic choices not only help to better understand marginalized masculinities in Pakistan, but also challenge and disrupt an idealized feminine aesthetic in Pakistan that is related to marriageability and conformity.

The eighth article 'Swallowing and spitting out the red pill: young men, vulnerability, and radicalization pathways in the manosphere', Matteo Botto and Lucas Gottzén address men's rights activism online on the 'manosphere', a loosely connected, misogynistic online movement that particularly attracts young men. Drawing on analysis of narratives from a Reddit community, the article identifies a shared ideology, the Red Pill. This neoconservative ideology adopts essentialist notions of gender in its creation of online misogynist radicalization pathways. The article young men's experiences of entering and exiting the manosphere, detailing the role of vulnerability in these processes.

The perils of online culture are also examined in the ninth article 'The culture is disgusting': analysing continuities and differences in experiences and perceptions of youth rape culture through cross-generational testimonies online' by Sophie Whitehead Drawing on anonymous survivor testimonies shared on the Everyone's Invited platform, the article analyses continuities and differences in experiences and perceptions of youth rape culture across generations. The article suggests that while there are consistent patterns of harm in experiences of rape culture over decades, there is hope to be found in distinct perceptions of rape culture between survivors of different ages. This occurs, the article finds, in the way young people wield the discourses and conceptual resources of society's reckoning with sexual violence to situate their experiences in a broader structural and cultural landscape. The mobilization of 'rape culture' as a conceptual resource amongst young people is increasingly visible at our current conjuncture, and this visibility is facilitated partly via digital connectivity and the expansion of personal testimony campaigns.

Sexual violence continues as a theme in the tenth article, 'Contesting gender: young women and feminist generations in gender-based violence services' by Ilaria Michelis. The paper draws on research with young activists in Serbia and Italy to explore their efforts to broaden the category of gender within feminist organizations. Narratives of generational conflict, the article argues, obfuscate a genuine struggle to redefine the subject of feminism and extend feminist solidarity to trans women and other marginalized groups. Different feminist praxes, as seen in the two case studies, can either trigger acts of generational disidentification and disengagement or foster spaces of intergenerational exchange and discussion. The paper suggests that in paying attention to the work that intergenerational conflict narratives are doing, and the work they are preventing, can help uncover and explicitly address the tensions currently permeating feminist spaces towards a more inclusive and expansive feminism.

The eleventh article focuses on feminism amongst young women in Turkey. In 'Becoming a young woman through a feminist lens: young feminist women in Turkey', Demet Lüküsl draws on research with young feminist women students at a university in Turkey. The article demonstrates how these feminist university students, as the members of a generation who had lived all their lives under the Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi- AKP) governments, articulate the difficulties of being young and a woman at a specific conjuncture in Turkey during which the gender regime has been going through a period of deterioration. Feminism, the paper suggest, not only acts to

empower these young women but it enables them as subjects of opposition in a political regime that has adopted an anti-gender agenda and which has withdrawn from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women, also known as the Istanbul Convention.

Young women are also the subject of the twelfth article, 'Black girlhood and emerging sexual identities: sexual citizenship and teenage girls of African descent in Athens' by Liza Tsaliki, Despina Chronaki and Olga Derzioti. The article draws on data from interviews with teenage girls and young women of African descent to offer an exploratory mapping of African women's and girls' lived experiences in Greece. Considering the ways in which participants accounted for the constructions of femininity within the African community the article draws importance to technologies of 'sexiness' and the ways in which sexual conduct in managed in relation to peers and parents.

The thirteenth article 'You're trying to put yourself in boxes which doesn't work": Exploring non-binary youth's personal growth using feminist relational discourse analysis' by Luke Ward and Siân Lucas, uses feminist relational discourse analysis to explore the regulation of gender identity borders and to consider the ways in which non-binary youth navigate these. The article considers forms of regulation through discourse analysis, whilst also tracing the personal experiences through the discursive realms by constructing I poems. The analysis highlights how a non-binary gender provides freedom from the gender binary for identity development and understanding of oneself in context, yet suggests that freedoms provided by non-binary identities is precarious and risks being regulated by individualism and attempts to shame, which cause youth to censor their gender diversities.

Young non-binary people are also the focus of the forteenth article 'Feeling the weight of the water: young nonbinary individuals and their strategies for manoeuvring through a binary world by Nina Perger. The article draws on research with young non-binary people in Slovenia. Using Bourdieu's concept of practical knowledge, the article analyses the practical strategies employed for coping with misrecognition. These strategies encompass tactful playing along with the binary rules of the game, pushing the rules into a state of limbo, and directly engaging and confronting the rules of the game. Moreover, a differentiated domain of strategies emerges, according to the parameters of safety, anticipation of achieving recognition, and affective investment in the relations. Overall, the article shows nonbinary young people to be skilful agents who apply a range of practical strategies to manoeuvre through a gender binary world.

Young non-binary people's practices of resistance are also key to the fifteenth article 'Did you just say I was lit?" transgender and non-binary youth doing gender; resisting cisnormativity in South African schools by Dennis Francis. Using concepts of power and resistance, this article explores how cisnormativity is (re)produced in schools through everyday practices and examines how such practices are resisted. The article draws on ethnographic interviews with 16–18-year-old racially diverse school attending trans and non-binary youth. In schools where cisnormativity is ubiquitous and unquestioned, the participant's identification as trans or non-binary emerges as a significant act of resistance against cisnormative power structures. Highlighted are the ways in which trans and non-binary youth recognize the prevailing cisgenderist scripts and, at the same time, assert a knowing script of who they are. As resilient agents, they talk back, masking their defiance through hidden transcripts. The article concludes with implications for how schools can meet the needs of trans and gender diverse learners.

The experiences of non-binary youth within education remains as a theme in the sixteenth article, 'Peeing and pronouns: living non-binary gender in higher education by Raf Benato, Jennifer Fraser and Francis Ray White. Non-binary people make up just over half the trans population of the UK and younger people are more likely to identify as non-binary than those over 35 (Government Equalities Office, 2018; ONS, 2023). Despite this increasing, but limited recognition, non-binary identities and experiences continue to be widely misunderstood. Similarly, university trans inclusion policies often focus on binary or medical transition and cannot fully accommodate the needs of non-binary students. In a context of increased focus on participation and success of marginalized social groups, the question of how non-binary students move through and thrive in higher education becomes more pressing.

This article draws on data from the largest survey to date of non-binary students in the United Kingdom and begins to fill those gaps, highlighting the prominence in the survey of issues around "peeing" and "pronouns" in the lived experiences of non-binary students, and demonstrating the ways that a lack of recognition detrimentally impacts on students' learning and lives at university.

Education remains as a focus of the seventeenth and final article 'Safe space and vulnerability discourses in supporting trans and non-binary students by Esther McIntosh and Sharon Jagger. The article draws on research into Anglican Foundation Universities in England, looking particularly at the role of chaplains as a bridge between the equality, diversity and inclusivity policies of universities and the Anglican Church's official rejection of both same-sex marriage and the writing of new liturgies for trans people. The article argues there is a need for deeper reflection on the notion of safe space and the cis-construction of trans and non-binary youth as vulnerable and suggests that protection and vulnerability discourses create contradictions that undermine agency and positive visibility of trans and non-binary young people.

We end this Special Edition with our contribution. For this, we have decided to offer a visual representation of some of the findings from 'Living Gender in Diverse Times: Young People's Understandings and Experiences of Gender in the Contemporary UK' in the form of a comic that was produced by the artist Jade Sarson. Working with the data from our interviews and focus groups, Jade created a graphic illustration of our participant's narratives. We are working with young people's support groups and with youth services to disseminate the comic as part of the project's impact strategy. We hope that you enjoy Jade's wonderful work that so vividly represents the richness of our participant's stories.

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