

Master Thesis
**Experiences of Non-Binary Youth on Romantic Relationships and Their
Perceived Influence on Well-Being**

Johanna Cordula Bernadett Liebetruh

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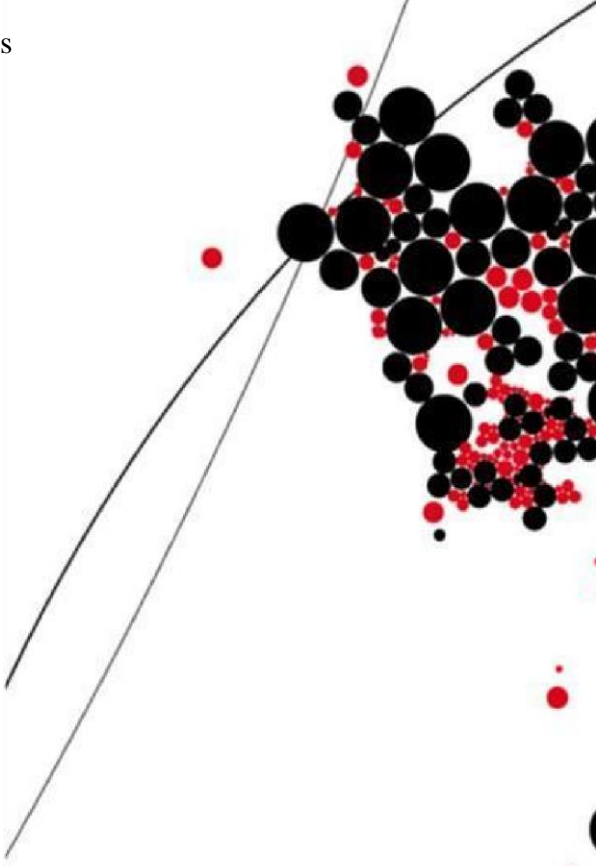
Department of Positive Clinical Psychology and Technology

University of Twente

First Supervisor: Dr. Tessa Dekkers

Second Supervisor: Anneke Sools

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Abstract

Nonbinary (NB) individuals have been found to experience mental health disparities, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and decreased well-being. This qualitative interview study examines with a positive psychological approach, experiences of NB individuals with romantic relationships (RRs) and their perceived influence on psychological well-being. A sample of 5 NB individuals were interviewed (23 to 25 years), getting asked about general RR experiences influencing their mental health and their perceptions of the six dimensions of psychological well-being. With reflexive thematic analysis four themes were conceptualized: (1) Experiencing feelings of purpose and meaning through their RR, (2) experiencing feelings of liberation through the RR, (3) participants experience the RR as a safe space, (4) gender related power imbalances. In those conceptualized themes all six dimensions of psychological well-being were perceived to be present, showing the diverse well-being inducing effects of RRs on NB individuals. In addition, this study also highlights the presence of gender-related power imbalances, specifically in past relationships with cisgendered partners, emphasizing the importance of gender-related power balance in shaping well-being outcomes. Future research is encouraged to further investigate other positive aspects of the conducted interviews, focusing on the perceptions of support systems, self-definitions of their gender identity, gender expressions and conflicts and challenges.

Keywords: romantic relationships, non-binary, couples, well-being, thematic analysis, qualitative study design, positive psychology, gender minority

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Introduction

Transgender and nonbinary (TNB) individuals are experiencing increased mental health disparities in comparison to their cis-straight-counterparts, as well to sexual minorities. These disparities include a higher risk for depressed mood, anxiety, substance use problems, up to seriously considering and attempting suicide (Marshall et al., 2011; Price-Feeney et al., 2020). On the other hand, romantic relationships (RRs) were found to enhance well-being, serving as a protective factor against low mental health, in cisgendered couples. There is little research examining the link between RRs, and well-being in gender minorities. This study focuses on the experiences of marginalized individuals, specifically, the minority group of non-binary (NB) individuals. In general, “Gender minority” is the term for clustering individuals, whose gender expression or identity does not match the traditional gender roles, for example transgender, gender non-conforming or non-binary individuals (Ayhan et al., 2020). NB gender identity specifically means differing from the sex assigned to at birth, varying from or rejecting the traditional cultural concept of gender in terms of male-female dichotomy (*National Institutes of Health*, 2016). This challenges the binary gender system of male-female and man-woman, which is used in western-society regards both levels, sexual orientation and gender identity. With that, NB individuals identify beyond, outside or between the gender binary. This includes people identifying as more than one gender at different times (e.g., bigender), not having a gender identity or a neutral one (agender), combining elements of genders (e.g., polygender) or/and gender identity fluctuating over time (genderfluid) (Kuper et al., 2014; Richards et al., 2017; Richards et al., 2016; Vincent, 2019).

Mental health of sexual and gender minorities

Current literature reveals evident disparities in mental health of sexual and gender minorities (SGM) in comparison to cisgender, heterosexual individuals. There is evidence to the claim that SGM individuals in comparison experience higher rates of mental health problems (Weinhardt et al., 2019). Numerous research mentions instances of discrimination, negative attitudes, and stigma, physical or verbal violence, hatred, fear, threats and economic abuse against SGM members (Ayhan et al., 2020; Johnson, 2013; Moleiro & Pinto, 2015).

Herman et al. (2019) in their study concentrated exclusively on gender minorities, finding that every second TNB person is diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety, compared to only every fifth person in the general population. The lifetime suicide attempt was found to

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be 28,9% in TNB individuals in the USA compared to 4.6% in general population, which is about six times higher for TNB individuals (Herman et al., 2019).

Next to that, more studies found similar results about the increased suicidal ideation and decreased mental health of gender minorities (Sutter & Perrin, 2016). Specifically, TNB individuals were revealed to exhibit elevated rates of depression and reporting worse self-rated health, in contrast with the cis-straight population (Lagunas et al., 2022). Those findings were confirmed by Dragon et al. (2017) as well as Downing and Przedworski (2018), who found TNB individuals experiencing more mental health disparities for differing chronic health conditions and showing higher rates of psychological distress.

Despite this cruciality to differentiate, most of the research on TNB health typically treats TNB individuals as part of a homogeneous population or categorizes them based on their identification in the gender spectrum but staying in a binary system (trans women vs. trans men) (Scandurra et al., 2019). This shows that despite being part of the same queer community and sharing experiences of discrimination based on gender identification, it is crucial to recognize binary transgender and non-binary individuals as distinct groups.

NB individuals may have unique experiences and challenges that differ from cis-straight and binary transgender people. Research by Matsuno (2019) claims that, due to the normativity of the binary gender system, NB individuals regularly face unique challenges compared to binary trans individuals. These challenges include microaggression, discrimination, harassment, resulting in decreased mental health. While Matsuno (2019) sheds light on external challenges, Fiani (2018) focuses on internal identity development. Those were found to be more flexible and less linear than the binary trans one (Fiani, 2018). Both studies acknowledge the unique challenges NB individuals are facing. Lastly, a study by Reisner and Hughto (2019) found that NB individuals significantly differed from binary trans individuals in matters of gender affirmation, healthcare utilization, mental health, violence victimization, substance use and social support. Overall, this shows the importance to consider binary or non-binary gender identities separately as an important aspect for and in transgender health. Therefore, Monro (2019) suggests specific considerations, including specifically examining health needs and experiences of NB individuals.

Well-being in positive psychology

To examine mental health and experiences of NB individuals, in the last two decades an extended mental health monitoring approach got more prevalent, shifting the perception of

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patients from passive people to active subjects. This positive psychological approach expands the earlier traditional definition of mental health from a minimalistic (absence of mental illness) to a more holistic one, including fulfilling life experiences (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). The positive psychological approach includes well-being, a state in mental health not only being seen as the absence of illness, but as the presence of something positive.

Adapting to positive psychology, this research also engages in a positive approach, by focusing on the psychological well-being of NB individuals rather than solely on their mental health and pathologies. Ryff and Singer (1996) state 6 dimensions of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, autonomy, purpose in life and positive relations to others. These dimensions represent existential life challenges, closely being linked to well-being (Keyes et al., 2002).

Focusing on the dimension of positive relationships, research portrays those as potential social support systems, having significant positive impact on mental health and well-being. In both, quantity and quality, positive relationships can have enhancing effects on mental health, health behaviour, physical health, and mortality risk in the general population (Diener & Chan, 2011; Umberson & Montez, 2010). The main categories of positive relationships and social support can be categorized as family, friends, and romantic relationships (RRs).

Positive relationships and social support have substantial benefits for mental health and well-being. For example, peer support can enhance self-esteem and reduce depression in students, which ultimately impacts academic performance and mental health (Patel et al., 2022). Another study of Ryan et al. (2010) exemplifies the lasting protective influence of family support and the feeling of acceptance for SGM individuals, resulting in higher self-esteem, and enhanced general health. Feeling accepted by family serves as protective factor for negative health outcomes like depression, substance abuse and suicidal ideation and attempts. This shows specifically, that for stigmatized minority groups like SGM, positive relationships and feeling accepted can play a crucial role to promote mental and physical health (Diener & Chan, 2011; Frost & LeBlanc, 2014; Lyons et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2010). While there is research about social relationships as a protective factor, the well-being inducing effects of RRs are too often disregarded.

This study will therefore specifically concentrate on RR's of NB individuals in relations to their (psychological) well-being. The World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2017) defines RR's as connections, founded on emotional and physical

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attraction, potentially evolving into enduring and intimate relationships. This definition allows the incorporation of polygamous relationship concepts, encompassing several individuals.

Empirical evidence suggests that RR's and significant others can contribute to more physical and mental health, especially when individuals must cope with stressful events (Alanko & Lund, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2015; Gómez-López et al., 2019). Moore and Leung (2002) found that secure romantic attachment styles reduce stress and loneliness. Especially in adolescents and students, RRs seem to be able to reduce problematic outcomes, anxiety, and social distress (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Ratelle et al., 2013; Weisskirch, 2017). Further, research has revealed that cis-heterosexual married couples reported more life satisfaction than single individuals (Waite & Gallagher, 2001). This extensive body of existing research emphasizes the impact of RR's on cis-heterosexual couples, which provides foundation for shifting the focus towards understanding their impact on SGM individuals and relationships.

For cisgendered people, the positive effects of RRs on well-being might seem nearly self-evident, but especially NB individuals' well-being might depend more on it. Graham and Barnow (2013) show stress-buffering and well-being-inducing effects of RR's as support systems on sexual minority couples, but also in gender minority couples those effects were found (St. Amand et al., 2013). A study from St. Amand et al. (2013) about transmen reported fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety. Siboni et al. (2022) further report positive influences for transgender people's well-being in RR's, through good communication, consent, respect, trust, and partners' support in helping them explore and accept their gender. However, the role of RRs and their perceived relation to well-being in NB individuals has not been examined yet. By doing so, a better understanding of how RR's can improve well-being could be provided, which could potentially be used to improve well-being of NB individuals through interventions.

Because most existing research on this topic focuses on cisgender- or binary trans individuals, the specific experiences of NB individuals are under researched. Especially, the combination of binary trans and NB individuals lacks differentiation, resulting in missing experiential values of this minority group. Enhancing the current knowledge will result in better representation of NB individuals, and could inform enhanced mental health intervention and prevention, with focus on positive psychology and well-being. Further, this research will add to the state of art by exploring and providing valuable insights into specific experiences, benefitting, as well as challenging well-being. With that, positive mental health

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aspects in RR, will get investigated, which limited research has been done on. Moreover, factors, dynamics or circumstances that contribute to the positive or negative perceptions of their RRs, and well-being will be identified.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the knowledge gap by improving the comprehension of NB identities, RRs, well-being, and their intersection. Mental health interventions and relationship counseling benefits by tailoring them to the individual specific needs of this NB population. Identifying well-being factors, which serve as protective factors, could result in the possibility to decrease the risk for psychological distress and pathologies. For this study, a qualitative research design was chosen, as not much is known about RRs of NB individuals in relation to well-being yet. This approach provides a solid starting point of gathering in-depth information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative approach is most suitable for adding information of NB youth, and its results might have added value in mental health sector. This study further explores the social context and examines its role in the attitudes and realities of young NB individuals. For this, interviews were conducted, based on which a thematic analysis was conducted.

This study aims to address the research question: “How do non-binary (NB) individuals perceive their romantic relationships (RRs) and their influence on well-being?”

Methods

Design

This research study employed a qualitative research design, which gives space to personal experiences and viewpoints. The data was conducted through semi-structured interviews. A reflexive thematic analysis of this collected data was executed, which provides a flexible and useful research tool, resulting in rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allows for an in-depth exploration of the individual perspectives and experiences of non-binary youth about their RRs, and the perceived influence related to mental health and well-being. Prior to conducting this research, approval was requested and granted by the BMS Ethical Committee (Request Nr. 231355; Appendix A).

Participants

For the data collection, convenience sampling was the method of choice. Participants were recruited via social media (Instagram, WhatsApp) with a posting, inviting individuals who identify as non-binary and are willing to answer questions, talk openly about their

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relationships, mental health, and well-being in an interview. Further on, the age ranges from 18-25 years old is considered a period of time of transition where young adults find themselves both in the prime of youth and navigating the complexities of adult life in the society. Therefore, this age is considered to be of certain importance. The inclusion criteria comprised (1) identifying as non-binary; (2) having experiences in RRs (have been in one or more RR in the past year, or currently being in one or more RR); (3) able to speak English; (4) between the age of 18-25 years old. From the interested individuals, who supplied the contact details, the inclusion criteria were checked. Finally, 5 individuals were selected by random lottery, to prevent sampling bias. The participants were between 23 and 25 years old and, except for one Dutch person, were all from Germany. The pronouns for all participants were they/them, with one person also using she/her and another switching their pronouns in the German language. All participants identified as pansexual, with one person additionally identifying as romantic asexual. The number of past relationships reported by participants varied: one participant had been in two romantic relationships (RRs), two participants in three RRs, and two participants in four RRs. At the time of the study, some participants were currently in relationships, while two were single and referenced their most recent RR. The duration of their current or most recent relationships ranged from a few months to five years, providing insights into both short-term and long-term relational experiences.

Researcher Description and Perspective

The researcher identifies themselves as non-binary and pan-sexual, which places them as a member of sexual and gender minority (SGM) themselves. The concept of gender binarity in the Western society, where the researcher was socialized, has always been a questionable approach for them. The researcher is part of the SGM community and aims to promote greater acceptance and awareness, as well as increased inclusion of diversities and minorities. In addition to inclusion, the researcher is aware of the significant differences in well-being from cis-straight counterparts to TNB individuals and within SGM individuals, recognizing the numerous resulting issues and injustices in the mental health field. The researcher has a graduate-level in scientific research and project-specific training in semi-structured interviewing.

This study fills a gap as a needed step towards improved mental health and well-being for less acknowledged minorities, such as NB individuals, by actively incorporating the experiences and viewpoints of those affected.

Procedure

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Data was collected through semi-structured interviews in English, held separately with each participant and the researcher. Participants got to choose to meet in person or online via Zoom, depending on personal preferences. This resulted in four online meetings and one in person interview, which was conducted on the university campus of Twente. In the beginning of the interviews, the informed consent form (Appendix B) was discussed orally and signed online. The participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any point without repercussions and the purpose of the study was disclosed. Further, the participants were provided with information how they can access mental health-support via an open public hotline (“TelefonSeelsorge”), if experiencing feelings of discomfort or problems after the interview. The interviews were audio recorded with a recording device.

The interviews followed an interview guide (Table 1), covering 28 questions on demographic information, experiences in RRs, perceptions of social support through partners, mental health, perception of discrimination and stigmatization. Furthermore, specific questions on the six dimensions of psychological well-being as described by Ryff and Singer (1996) were included. The first questions were about the demographics of the participant, including their gender, sexual identity, age, and their partner’s gender.

After the demographic questions, general experiences and perceptions of RR were discussed, like number and duration of RRs: “How many RR are/were you involved in?” and “How would you define a RR?” or “Are you in a RR at the moment?”. Then the questions about a specific RR started. The interviewer tried to get the reflection of experiences and feelings within this RR with questions like: „How are you feeling with your partner? “Can you tell me about your current/past relationship?”. By asking the questions in an open manner instead of following specific topic, the participants were allowed to express their own priorities and experiences, articulate significant feelings on their own terms and share their own perspectives.

Furthermore, the participants were asked about negative experiences through discrimination and stigma, as well as positive experiences through support to prevent from asking the question about only one direction and therefore possibly biasing the answers: “While being in your RR, have you encountered discrimination or stigma because of your gender?” and “Do you feel like your partner supports or affirms you as a NB person?”. To explore the influence of power dynamics within RR, participants were asked about differences in control and power and how their social identities affected these dynamics. Following the research of Sevelius (2019) and Reisner et al. (2010), questions probed

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whether prejudice and structural disadvantages influenced participants to sacrifice other needs, like health or sexual autonomy, to fulfill their gender affirmation needs. Afterwards, the participants were asked on their mental-health and well-being, during and in their RR. Example questions were “Can you tell me about the influence of RR on your well-being?”; “Do you feel like your RR influenced your well-being and mental health, and if yes, how? “. After those questions, the six dimensions of well-being were explored, with two questions per dimension. All the questions relate to the personal experiences of the participants as NB individuals, with different dimension, within their RR. For example, asking for personal growth, the question was formulated like this: “Reflecting on your experiences in the RR, how has it added to your personal growth and development as a NB individual?”. With that, the participants were asked openly about all kind of experiences but also got primed with specific aspects they could integrate in their focus.

Potential follow-up questions, as well as more specific probe questions, were asked if the participant struggled with the answers or the researcher wanted to gain further insights. This ensured a certain information richness of the described experiences and a natural conversation flow. Potential probing questions, for example, were: “Can you please elaborate on what you said about.....?”.

These interviews explored the participants` personal experiences and served as an opportunity to express their thoughts, insights, and feelings. During the interview, there were regular checks for correct understanding, through paraphrasing the mentioned experiences of the participant. During the interview, the transcript was handed out, with the offer to omit parts of the transcript if so desired by the participants.

Table 1

Interview Questions

Category	Questions
Demographics	1. Where are you from?
	2. How old are you?
	3. How would you describe your gender identity?
	4. What are your pronouns?
	5. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
General Relationship Questions	6. How many RR are/were you involved in?
	7. How long were those relationships lasting?
	8. Are you in a RR at the moment?

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	9. How would you define the RR?
Specific Romantic Relationship (RR) experiences	10. Can you tell me about your current/most recent RR? 11. How are you feeling about your partner? 12. How are you feeling with your partner?
Discrimination, Stigma & Support	13. While being in your RR, have you encountered discrimination or stigma because of your gender? 14. Have you encountered discrimination or stigma by your partner, because of your gender? a. How has this influenced your relationship dynamics? 15. Do you feel like your partner supports or affirms you as a NB person? 16. Can you give an example of this? 17. How does your NB identity affect the kind & amount of support, your partner and you give each another?
Power Dynamics	18. In your experience, have you noticed any imbalances in power or control within your romantic relationships that relates to your gender identity? (e.g., sexual autonomy) 19. Can you think of instances or examples where gender identities influenced you RR dynamics?
Autonomy	20. In your RR, how do you navigate and express your individual identity and autonomy, specifically considering your NB gender identity? 21. Can you share examples where you feel a sense of independence (and self-determination) within your relationship?
Environmental Mastery	22. How do you perceive your ability to effectively manage and adapt to challenges within your RR while embracing your NB identity? 23. Are there specific aspects of your relationship where you feel a sense of control, specifically related to your gender identity?
Personal Growth	24. Reflecting on your experiences in the RR, how has it

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	added to your personal growth and development as a NB individual?
	25. Can you share examples where your relationship has positively influenced your self-growth and understanding of your gender identity?
Personal Relations	26. How do you foster positive connections and relationships within the context of your RR, considering the unique dynamics of being a NB individual?
	27. Can you share examples of how your partner(s) support and contribute to positive interactions with others, acknowledging your gender identity?
Purpose in Life	28. How does your RR provide a sense of purpose and meaning in your life, considering the intersection with your NB identity?
	29. Can you discuss specific aspects of your relationship that contribute to a sense of fulfillment and purpose in your overall life?
Self-Acceptance	30. How has your RR influenced your self-acceptance as a NB individual? Can you share moments where your partner(s) have played a role in your self-acceptance journey?
	31. In navigating your gender identity within the relationship, how do you cultivate a sense of self-love and acceptance?

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were directly transcribed, with the real names removed and replaced through pseudonyms, to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants during the whole process. Furthermore, any information potentially linking to participants was removed from the transcripts. After submitting the thesis, the audio recordings were deleted.

As a method for the data analysis an inductive-deductive reflexive thematic analysis was chosen, which means that the themes are strongly connected to the data themselves

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(Patton & Quinn, 1990). Simultaneously, a deductive approach is given through the specific look-out for statements related to psychological well-being, following the dimensional framework by Ryff (1996). During the process, the six-step-approach introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading the interview transcripts several times and made first notes. Afterwards, a first generation of codes was made by finding first patterns through separating and coding segments of transcripts that entail the same core ideas, related to aspects of their RR, well-being and mental health. In the third step, the codes were combined into constructs of first initial themes. At this point ten initial themes were constructed. Afterwards, the themes were reviewed and checked for coherence and helpfulness in answering my research question. In that process, four themes were removed, as they did not fit all variables of interest of this study. For example, several self-definitions and ideas about the participants' own gender identity were considered irrelevant, as they left-out the relation to their well-being. In the fifth step, the themes were named with the essence of the codes and clear definitions were added. The last step was reporting the thematic analysis and writing out the themes and what they consist of. This was done by using anonymized interview quotes for illustrating and supporting the codes. During the whole process, intensified during the last step, the experiences and variables were matched on similarity and overlap with the six psychological well-being dimensions. The match criterions were literal verbal statements of certain dimensions like: "This made me feel autonomous.", or by interpretation of the statements. This resulted in four themes constructed, one with several subthemes.

Results

Of the five interviewed participants, three were in RRs at the time of their interviews (A for 2,5 years; B for 1 year; C for 5 years). The other two participants had a break-up some months earlier (D was in a RR for 3.5 years & E was in a RR for some months). All participants reported having been in two to four relationships in their past, but mainly referred to their current or most recent RR during the interview. The participants' perception of their RR was found to be grouped in four. The perceived positive influence on well-being reflected in three themes and one theme was about perceived negative influences of gender related power imbalances (Table 2).

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Table 2

Overview of Themes

Theme	Description
Participants experience feelings of purpose and meaning through their RRs	The RR itself, caring for someone, affirming each other's gender identity, activism and living outed and accepted with one's partner, was perceived meaningful and purpose giving.
Participants experience feelings of liberation through their RRs	Participants reported feeling liberated from cis-heteronormative norms in the presence of their partner, enabling a more authentic expression of their gender. They no longer feel pressured to conform to traditional masculine expectations for societal validation. Additionally, they perceive enhanced conflict resolution and communication skills, leading to healthier dynamics in their romantic relationships.
Participants experience their RRs as a safe space through: <i>Exploring one's own gender identity</i>	Participants saw their RRs as a safe space to explore their gender expressions. RRs were perceived to create environments where they can listen to their own needs and explore preferences without predefined expectations and standards, but rather implicit encouragement to embrace and express their true selves. The safe atmospheres of RRs were perceived helping them discover themselves, embrace different gender sides and become more self-accepting, up to coming out to themselves and their surroundings.
<i>Feeling seen and listened to</i>	Partner listening and creating space for their experiences, despite of their own inability to identify with their situation made the participants felt understood and encountered with respect, and acceptance about their gender identity.
<i>Partner affirming with pronouns and language</i>	Gender affirming language, including changed names, pronouns, or gender specific pet names, evoked feelings of validation and acceptance among participants. The use of gender affirming language was found to foster self-acceptance and personal growth, while creating an open and affirming environment. Participants believe that aligning language with their identity, aids in reprogramming their mindset and facilitates embracing their authentic selves more completely.

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<i>Partner affirming outward presentation and appearance</i>	Participants reported feeling safe through affirming support by their partners about their outward presentation and appearance. They perceived their partner helpful when experiencing insecurities about their gender identity and their expression, as their partners normalize struggles and offer support during transitioning. They associate the support with up-building courage to prioritize their own needs and listening to their own requirements and desires way more actively.
Power imbalances because of gender	Participants experienced gender related power imbalances in past RRs with cisgendered partners, which they perceived as negatively impacting their well-being through decreased autonomy and environmental mastery. This resulted in high awareness and sensitivity about gender related power dynamics and the desire to prevent such. Instead, the participants felt an urge to interact equally with their partners and take control through effective communication.

Participants are experiencing purpose and meaning through their RRs

In this first theme, participants expressed a sense of purpose and meaning, which they derived from the existence of and participation in close relationships: „*In my relationship, the purpose and meaning of my life become visible as a function of that relationship existing.*” – Participant A, or: “...*it gives me a sense of purpose to have this relationship, and it gives me a sense of purpose to take care of my partner.*” - Participant C.

These excerpts show that the mere existence of the relationship was experienced as meaningful. Still, participants also emphasized that shared identities made their relationship particularly meaningful. For one participant this was a shared gender identity: “*I also derive a lot of meaning and purpose from my relationship. Being with another non-binary person, affirming each other, caring*”- Participant A. Another participant emphasized shared ideals and ideas of love: “*Being with a person, which is not afraid of listening, also believing in the same ideals, who has the same idea of love in general, who is also interested in activism. Who is not afraid to also consider to be more active about certain things. A person, which is respectful. Inspiration. You know, like, inspired of, like living itself.*” – Participant E.

However, the notion that a relationship gives purpose in life was not universally shared. One individual described “*I don't think they give me purpose or something, um, I*

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think that's not related to them. “– Participant B. This shows that though overall romantic relationships were considered as providing meaning, this was not always considered the case.

Participants experience their RR as liberation

In this second theme, participants revealed that their romantic relationships provided a sense of freedom from cis-heteronormative norms. They expressed a sense of freedom, as the usual expectations rooted in cis heteronormativity didn't seem to apply in their romantic connections. Participant B describes the contrast between what is allowed in the relationship and what is allowed in society in the context of femininity: *“I think when I'm with them, I allow myself to be a lot more feminine. Um, it's in the way, uh, what clothes I wear, the way I act, the way I speak. I think, um, because there isn't the pressure to perform masculinity, um, in order to be taken seriously or something.”*. This excerpt shows that the individual feels a sense of comfort and liberation in presence of the partner, allowing for a more authentic expression of their gender identity. This freedom, as they do not feel the pressure to conform to traditional masculine expectations for societal validation, was shown to be taken seriously.

Another participant emphasized the feeling of liberation not as coming from their relationship specifically, but rather their non-binary gender identity: *“I think because I'm free to express my gender how I see fit and explore, how I see fit I have like a unique type of freedom. And because being queer goes against, what I perceive to be like one of these centrally most important social identities, that we have as people in western countries, pretty much all countries. Because my experience of it goes against the norm. By breaking these specific shackles, I've broken all shackles of society. I feel very free to be myself and to meet challenges in my own way, and that my efforts are enough, high self-efficacy, to actually achieve the change I want, or that at least I'm able to seek the change or the help, I need to achieve the change I want.”* - Participant A. They experience a broad sense of liberation by challenging several societal identities through their queerness.

Two participants state that this liberation from societal norms helped them to better navigate romantic relationships, without gender relationship stereotypes like “boys will be boys”. According to these participants, as non-binary individuals they think of themselves as having better conflict resolution skills, independent from cis-heteronormative norms, and its stigmatic constraints of gender roles. *“I think like because I have a non-binary lens on the world, I approach everything or every challenge also in my relationship, very, very independent of social norms, and I see more holistically the situation. And I'm able to, I think,*

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evaluate things more accurately without this gendered lens of, for example, you know, boys will be boys. So I can't solve this issue in my relationship because I think that that's just how men are. That never occurs to me, and that has never influenced or hindered our conflict resolution skills, I think, especially as queer people. Doing so independently of cis heteronormative norms. It helps." - Participant A.

Interestingly, a participant states, that not being required to adhere to the social norms of male masculine behaviour allows them to approach conflict in a more holistic way. Participant B states: *"I don't feel the need to perform a masculine way and that makes communication a lot easier in some ways. Um, and therefore makes it easier to deal with any challenges."* Overall, participants in this theme describe their RR as providing a required liberating space from cis heteronormativity, allowing for authentic expression of gender identity. Participants experienced freedom enhancing conflict resolution skills and recall the empowering impact of RR as fostering personal-growth, self-discovery, and authenticity beyond (gendered) societal schemas.

Participants experience their RRs as a safe space

Participants experienced their RRs as a safe space. That safe space was created as reported by experiencing the possibility to explore their gender identity, feeling recognized and listened to, and getting affirmed in their pronouns and outward presentation by their partner.

1. Romantic Relationships as a safe space to explore one's own gender identity

Another positive experience of NB individuals in their RR was the possibility to explore their own gender identity in the safe space. Participants reported a feeling of freedom through their partner, to explore gender expressions, like wardrobe, make-up, or pronouns. Being provided the space to express their own needs and explore their preferences was experienced as having a very positive influence on their well-being. This was described in statements like: *"I think because we're so supportive of each other's gender identity. It's just very open. There are no expectations and no standards, but there's also kind of the implicit expectation to live as your true self and to be true to yourself. And that's very encouraging, and also helps me kind of continuously explore my gender"* - Participant A, or *"It kind of gives me the possibility to experiment a bit with my expression, um, and see what I like and what I don't like."* - Participant B. In the first statement participant A explains that the strong support between both partners creates an open and accepting environment, with no predefined expectations and standards, but rather implicit encouragement to embrace and

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express their true selves. This atmosphere motivated ongoing explorations of their own gender and personal growth. Participant B points out the importance of the possibility to explore their preferences of gender expression.

Participant A further stated that the safe atmosphere of the RR helped them to discover themselves, embracing different aspects of their gender and being more self-accepting, up to coming out to themselves and their surroundings. They articulate: „*With my non-binary identity. The relationship definitely does a lot to affirm that. And it's kind of a feedback loop, like my relationship is very trans positive and helps me or has helped me explore my non-binary identity. And my non-binary identity helps me navigate my relationship and find new, find new ways to solve problems or have better interactions. So, it kind of reinforces each other*”- Participant A. In this way, the relationship as a safe space was considered mutually beneficial to both partners. The relationship was felt to support trans-positivity, which contributed to explore, affirm, and influence their NB identity, which then enhanced their ability of problem-solving and improved interactions within the relationship.

Participants considered safe exploration in their RR a necessity: „*It's about me who never had space to actually become my truthful self. And I have to. I survived since my whole life trying to find the answers to my questions.*” - Participant E. Next to the positive effects of support, a participant also experienced a lack of support through the perceived gender identity. They recount their experiences with an ex-partner about their gender identity: “*Because in my previous relationship, definitely it did influence it in a bad way. Uh, I just felt super lonely, and I felt like I couldn't talk to anyone, and I felt like my needs weren't being met and weren't being talked about. So that was definitely negative impact. So now I feel like it does influence my mental health.*”- Participant C. The lack of respect and misunderstanding shown by their ex-partner about their gender identity, lead them to feel lonely and not heard and seen in their experiences and worldviews. Those statements emphasize the perceived importance and necessity of a safe space for NB individuals to explore and discover their preferences and embrace their true selves.

2. Positive support by partner about gender identity- feeling seen & listened to

Feeling understood and heard was a second subtheme, that was conceptualized as part of the participants' perception of their RRs as a safe space. As one participant articulates it: „*I want to be seen as the person that I am, um, and not my assigned gender or something like that. Um, I want to be, uh, important to the person. I want to be, um, cherished and loved. I mean, to feel loved despite having, like, this um, societal, uh, frame or narrative that I'm a*

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freak.”- Participant B. This shows the desire to be accepted and loved by someone for their perceived non-binary self. They fear, out of experience, a transphobic societal lens of trans people. Being listened to and seen beyond social norms was perceived to reinforce the acceptance by their partner.

The importance of being listened to becomes clear from participant E’s negative experience, too after disclosing their non-binary identity to their partner. Participant E experienced misunderstandings from the romantic partner after disclosing as non-binary, and the partner’s hesitations to engage and listen: „*Why wouldn’t someone just be like “I don’t understand that, but I will listen. I will listen because you are someone, who is really important to me. (...) You should just listen and try to become someone which is capable of making me feel safe. You should support me and nothing else. This is what partnership is about and this is what being a truthful ally is like. Or a true friend or a true like human like truthful human, like loving human*”- Participant E. The individual states concrete desires and attitudes about treatment by their partner, as getting listened to and supported in their gender identity, in order to feel safe. They state how crucial it feels to be listened to, even if the topic of gender identity is unknown to their partner.

Concluding, for the participants to be listened to and to be seen the way they perceive themselves, suggest efforts of their partner to provide space and support in their life reality and gender identity. Listening and creating room for their experiences, despite of their partners own inability to identify with their situation, made the participants feel understood, respected and accepted in their gender identity.

3. Partner affirming through pronouns and language

Another aspect that contributed to a feeling of safety in the participants RRs were the gender affirmations experienced through appropriate gender affirming language. Specifically, getting referenced to with a changed name, pronouns, or gender specific pet names by their partners resulted in feelings of validation. One participant describes being with their partner in a social setting: „*And, um, when we were, like, with friends or just us, he would call me his boyfriend and, uh, change my names, like my version and female version. And I really liked it. Made me feel pretty accepted most of the time*”- Participant D. In this excerpt, the partner’s use of gender appropriate names plays a crucial role in making the participant feel accepted in their NB identity.

Another participant explains why it is important for them that their partner uses their right pronouns: „*So this is why I also use the pronouns they/them. Because for me, it’s really*

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important to allow myself to use language, which helps me be more open towards myself and re-program myself, so that I'm being able to be my truthful self.”- Participant E. The individual explains that this use of gender affirming language fosters self-acceptance and personal growth, while creating an open and affirming environment for them. They believe that using language that aligns with their identity, aids in reprogramming their mindset and allows for embracing their authentic self-more fully.

Contrary, getting misgendered by a partner resulted in feelings of frustration: *“So it's tiring for sure. It definitely can also lead to, like, bigger problems than just being annoyed or whatever, uh, to, like, depression, uh, depressive episodes. Um. Always going through that hurts. That misunderstanding. Um, it definitely does something to you. And I had to go through a lot. Um, if you just think about, like, going through discrimination or just mental behavior or, uh, ignorance, just when it comes to that term. Um, and it's ridiculous, like. Ridiculous misgendering”* – Participant E. They explain that the partner’s purposeful misgendering, jokes and ignorance towards trans people and their experiences led to fatigue, annoyance, and even attributed to serious issues like depression and depressive episodes.

4. Partner affirming outward presentation and appearance

RRs also had a unique role in affirming participants’ outward presentation and appearance. One participant reported: *„Because sometimes I struggle with, like, body dysmorphia and, um. Yeah, he gave me all the support I needed in those times. Just really accepting me. Not asking questions that was rude. Just like how I was feeling. And that I'm beautiful and that I was pretty boyfriend and all of that stuff. Just made me think that it was normal to be non-binary. And before that, uh, I always kind of felt like it would be a big deal.”- Participant D. This statement as well as several others from different participants explain how helpful their partner is, when feeling insecure about their gender identity and their expression. Some participants even described their partners taking a very active role in exploring their gender expression. For example, participant A recalls that their partner largely introduced and encouraged feminine activities: *“All the fem[inine] stuff I do has kind of been introduced to me by my partner. Like the first time I ever wore makeup, my partner did my makeup the first time or deciding that I was non-binary was in conversation with him. And yeah, like my whole kind of queer journey, he's always been there and had an influence more in the beginning than now”*.*

Participants specifically articulated the importance of a partner’s support when seeking medical transition, which can evolve medical interventions such as hormone therapy

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or gender-affirming surgeries. Participant B describes how next to the perceived positive effects of transitioning through a decreasing body dysmorphia, getting supported by the partner during the transition process, got experienced as helpful: „*Not sure if I've grown a lot. It's more. Like having someone who supports you in transition also means for me, um, that I had the courage to do things for myself more, um, listen more to my own needs.*”- Participant B.

Perceived missing support for the participants gender affirming appearance, resulted in the participants feeling sadness or dissatisfaction: „*But when I, um, thought about, um, taking testosterone, he was, I don't know, I think he was, like, scared for me that it would change my body in a way that he or me wouldn't like. And, um, he could be nicer about it. Just let put it that way. Hmm. Yeah. I felt sad at some point (...)*”- Participant D recalls the missing support of their ex-partner about their desired transition.

Concluding the affirming behaviour of the partner in their RR, about the participants gender expression (appearance and outward presentation), resulted in the participants feeling valued, validated and emotionally supported. This safe environment was perceived to contribute to a sense of understanding, acceptance, and creation of a trans positive environment for the participants to express their gender identity authentically. The statements explain how helpful the participants perceived their partners, when feeling insecurities about their gender identity and their expression. Furthermore, the gender related support was perceived to promote a positive and affirming relationship dynamic.

Power imbalances because of gender

The last theme focuses on how the NB individuals experience power dynamics in their RRs' as influencing their well-being. Participants recalled past unpleasant experiences with gender related power imbalances in their past relationships specifically with cisgendered partners, which they perceived as negatively impacting their mental health. Contrary to the other themes, experiences with power imbalances in their RRs because of their gender identity, were perceived as deconstructive for well-being. Especially, the participants autonomy and environmental mastery were perceived to get negatively impacted by gender related power imbalances. Based on those past experiences, the participants developed awareness of such power imbalances and found it extremely crucial to prevent those dynamics in their current or future RRs. Furthermore, they felt a desire to interact on mutual ground with their new partners and took control through effective communication.

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Three participants experienced power imbalances with their ex-partners, especially in sexual activities. Those experiences got reported to be sensitive a topic. One participant articulates: *“In my second relationship, there was definitely a big power imbalance on sexual activity related things. Um. Mostly because I just always want to take care of this man, and he definitely had a much higher need for sex than I did. So, I would often put my needs aside.”*- Participant C. They perceived power imbalances in matters of needs for sexual interaction, and then putting their own needs aside in favor of their ex-partner. A further sexual aspect of power imbalances got described by Participant D: *“The most problems I have with that I still have, like, a female body. And so, the penetration part, I think with that comes control over like my body from his side. And sometimes I just do like to have a penis myself and be in control and. Not just do like submissive parts.”*- Participant D. They explained that those intimate dynamics got influenced by their own set of complex feelings. They desired control and the taking of a more assertive role, next to a different dynamic that allows for a more active and empowered participation in intimate situations. They felt like being in a submissive role through their female body and this influenced their sense of agency and control leading to feelings of discomfort.

Another NB individual experienced a sense of power and liberation in breaking up with their partner, with whom they experienced an amount of gender related power imbalances. *“Definitely in the breaking up, for sure. Um, to realize. Um, after all this bullshit, I had to go through with her. Choosing myself. Choosing to leave that person, choosing to still be loving and understanding and just a good person. Even though I got hurt and even though I got treated unfair. It was definitely when I felt the most independent. Like saying you don't need someone in your life except your own self.”*- Participant E. They described the various toxic behaviour of their partner, especially regards their gender identity, which lead them feel treated unfair. They felt like societal expectations and gender norms influenced their dynamics, contributing to this treatment. Despite enduring the challenges, they chose to prioritize themselves through breaking-up, regardless of gender-related challenges, moving towards self-empowerment and autonomy.

One participant describes that they cannot think of any existing imbalance in their current RR with their trans partner: *“Not in the way that I can think of any example of like patriarchy or matriarchy in our household.(...) If it's somebody with very specific ideas about power dynamics, for example, then that would be off-putting, because then you already have preconceived notions you're trying to impose on a person for them to be a certain way.”* –

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Participant A. The participant said that they would find traditional power-dynamics and structures intensely off-putting and uncomfortable, stating the desire to meeting each other as mutuals. Further they recalled: “*I wouldn't say that our gender identities in themselves create a power imbalance at all.*”- Participant A. The participant states that they do not experience an inherent contribution to power imbalances in their queer relationship with a trans man.

Concluding, several participants perceived their autonomy and environmental mastery negative impacted by gender related power imbalances, especially experienced in past RRs with cisgendered partners. Therefore, gender related power balance and meeting the partner on mutual ground gets perceived as a crucial aspect, for the patients to flourish.

Discussion

This study aims to explore the experiences of young NB-individuals with romantic relationships (RRs) and the influence on their mental well-being through five interviews. Four themes were identified in the thematic analysis (1) Experiencing feelings of purpose and meaning, (2) experiencing feelings of liberation, (3) experiencing the RR as a safe space, (4) gender related power imbalances.

RRs were seen as having the potential to positively impact all six dimensions of existential life challenges, which are closely linked to psychological well-being (Ryff & Singer, 1996). They were perceived as *positive interactions* and to provide emotional connection while contributing to a greater *purpose and meaning*. *Autonomy* and *environmental mastery* were perceived as encouraged in their RRs through the partners' respect for individuality and the resulting supportive environment with the possibility and encouragement to explore their gender identity. It was often perceived that partners aimed to discourage dependency or predefined expectations. Instead, they appeared to encourage independence and the embrace of personal individuality and authenticity on all levels. This was perceived to further *personal growth* and *self-acceptance* through the promotion of growth and validation from the interviewees' partners.

Previous research has shown that RRs in general are considered beneficial for well-being (Gómez-López et al., 2019). This research provides an explanation from the point of view from NB individuals, of the function behind that, and addresses 'how' and 'why' RRs were perceived as having the potential to enhance well-being. One aspect, which was valued and perceived as supportive were gender affirmations by romantic partners. Research has shown the positive effects of gender affirming language on enhancement of physical health

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and well-being (Galupo et al., 2020; Glynn et al., 2016; King & Gamarel, 2021). This study found that the participants were perceiving the gender affirming behaviour and communication as support, perceiving their RRs as inclusive and affirmative, thus creating a safe space. Galupo et al. (2020) portray that gender affirming communication includes identity validation, identity endorsement, active learning, and active defense. While all those themes were found to be crucial also for participants of this study, specifically identity endorsement can be related to the participants' perceptions.

Another pathway in which RRs might be beneficial for NB individuals is the liberation from cisgendered norms. Participants reported experiencing discrimination and transphobia because of their gender identity in the past and feeling socially judged for it. In companionship of their partner the participants felt liberated to behave independently from social judgement, unmask and be their authentic selves, which resulted in feelings of comfort, satisfaction, and feeling improvement of their conflict resolution skills. Hence, this study suggests that RRs may enhance the feeling of being well-equipped to navigate relationship challenges, which might be an enhancement factor for the perceived well-being. Previous research suggests that such conflict resolution skills may vary dependent on gender, but also that other factors can influence them, such as cultural norms or personal character traits (Brahnam et al., 2005). Participants in this study felt that their ability to handle stressful situations with their partner improved without the pressure of gender norms. They felt accepted in their NB gender identity, which contributed to honest conversations with their partner. Magees' (2022) study about conflict resolution skills in same sex couples shows this effect as a relation of less internalized shame about one's self-concept and enhanced conflict engagement, as well as resolution skills. Further, conflict resolution skills were found to be able to reduce depressive symptoms, create greater sexual functioning and increased relationship satisfaction through disclosure of stigmatized problems like sexual problems (Merwin et al., 2017). Concluding, the findings of the current study indicate that conflict resolution skills and low internalized shame may be equally important in non-binary individuals.

Another factor which is considered potentially relevant in impacting the perceived well-being of the NB individuals is the perception of autonomy in their RRs. This autonomy was closely tied to acceptance, trust, and the ability to rely on their partner, while simultaneously not feeling controlled or restricted in any sense by them. This dynamic was also found for cis relationships in a study of Ratelle et al. (2013), who identified autonomy as

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an important aspect, influencing one's individual need fulfillment. They revealed that adolescents who perceived romantic partners as supportive of their autonomy, predicted higher levels of subjective well-being. In conclusion, this study highlights the crucial importance of RRs for perceived independence and autonomy for non-binary individuals. These relationships emphasize high levels of personal growth and autonomy while simultaneously seeking high levels of security and safety, particularly concerning their gender identity.

Another potential positive impact of RRs on NB individuals' well-being was found to be the creation of an accepting environment. This included self-acceptance and the expectations towards their partners to accept the participants' life realities, despite of their struggles to identify with those. Self-acceptance is defined as recognizing and embracing all of ones (positive and negative) traits and was found to be a protective factor against mental health issues such as depression and anxiety in longitudinal research in the general US population (Ackerman, 2018; Ryff et al., 2015). The current study further suggests that RRs have the potential to act beneficial on self-acceptance of NB individuals. In previous studies, positive health effects through acceptance of close relationships have also been found to protect against depression, substance abuse, and suicidality for all SGM members (Ryan et al., 2010). Summarizing, the participants perceived RRs as creating a safe environment through acceptance and gender affirmation, enhancing self-acceptance and self-exploration, and increasing feelings of liberation and autonomy. While RRs were found to be the major well-being enhancing factor, not all experiences were solely positive. Besides RR as a safe space and the supporting behaviour of the partners, participants also experienced discrimination by previous partners. Loneliness and feelings of misunderstanding up to depressive feelings and depressive episodes were reported. This indicates that besides of the positively perceived support, RRs can also have possible severe negative impacts on well-being and mental health, depending on the partners' support and the perceived relationship quality.

The absence of these aspects positively influencing well-being (such as feelings of purpose, liberation, safety, and autonomy) were experienced as diminishing the participants' overall sense of well-being. Especially gender related power imbalances and missing affirmation through disrespectful behaviour, such as intentional misgendering and crossing personal boundaries of the participants, influenced well-being and mental health severely negative. Sevelius (2013) frames social affirmation of one's gender identity as a

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psychological need and posits that this need can be heightened by social oppression (e.g. sexual objectification, cissexism) that many transgender women experience. Further it is suggested that biases and systematic disadvantages drive some TNB individuals prioritizing their gender affirmation needs over crucial health aspects or sexual autonomy therefore sacrificing other psychological and physiological needs (Reisner et al., 2010; Sevelius, 2013). Participants of the current study similarly perceived such sacrifices in past RRs as having deconstructive impact on their mental health and well-being. Specifically, experiences with *gender related power imbalances* were harmful for their well-being. When asked about power dynamics in their RRs, all participants reacted extremely sensitive and showed great awareness about this topic. Especially, the participants autonomy and environmental mastery were negatively impacted by perceived gender related power imbalances, specifically a dominantly perceived behaviour of their cisgendered partners. Thus, while the abovementioned research by Sevelius (2013) focuses on binary trans individuals, the perception of gender affirmation as a psychological need seems equally applicable to the NB individuals of this study. Further, such experiences are not exclusively reported by NB individuals, but numerous studies show instances of such discrimination on SGM members in general (Ayhan et al., 2020; Johnson, 2013; Moleiro & Pinto, 2015).

The decision to focus only on NB individuals in this study was made under the assumption that they face unique challenges as binary trans individuals, due to the normativity of the binary gender system. Against prior expectations, there was only one conceptualized theme related exclusively to NB individuals, namely the perception of their *RRs as liberating*. The results of the study of Teixeira et al. (2023) found similar results of about positive effects of social support for NB individuals. They found the participants conceptualizing their NB identity as a source of liberation from the binary sex/gender system and experienced it as a fight against the cisgendered normative gender system. With that their study states similar factors perceived as liberating for NB individuals (liberation from cis-heteronormative norms and liberation from expectations of social validation), although they do not specifically refer to the context of RRs' but rather all life areas. Further, in this study, those liberating feelings expressed themselves in the perception of enhanced conflict resolution skills, as reported by the participants. Even though the positive effects of conflict resolution in RRs are not solely related to the NB gender identity, factors like acceptance of their gender identity seem to specifically enhance their perceived conflict resolution skills and related well-being.

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Limitations and strengths

There are some limitations in this study, which was done as an exploratory, small-scale, qualitative research. The sample size of five individuals is relatively low, considering the possible generalizability. Even though the insights were of value, the scope of this study was insufficient to depict the diverse range of experiences within the entire NB population regarding RRs. Specifically, the study could not explore experiences related to racial and cultural diversity, different age groups, and varying socio-economic backgrounds. A bigger sample would have added a richer and more diverse exploration of NBs' RRs experiences, since these are influenced by several factors. Related to that, another limit of this study is its conduction within a specific western cultural context. Four out of five participants were from Germany and one participant was from the Netherlands. Cultural norms and societal attitudes regarding TNB individuals can differ significantly from one country or region to another, and people can assign different socially and culturally constructed meanings to aspects of gender and identity (Catalano & Shlasko, 20120.) All participants of this study lived in western, European area, and were therefore influenced by its unique cultural and societal factors, which vary to other countries in the world. While the Netherlands has been known for defending the rights of SGM individuals since 1946 and being one of the most progressive countries in this regard, discrimination against sexual and gender minorities in German society remains a problem (ILGA- Europe, 2022; Recabarren & Holz, 2022).

Using firsthand reported data, especially on such socially sensitive questions, can poses challenges such as social desirability bias or recall inaccuracies (King & Brunner, 2000). Being interviewed as a member of a minority group might have led to social desirability bias among participants, as they may have felt the necessity to represent the views of the entire minority group favorably. This bias may have specifically led the participants to emphasize the positive role of their gender identity and their relationship to their well-being and mental health. This social desirability bias together with the positive psychological approach of this study might be prone to overreporting positive factors. Consequently, certain negative nuances of the themes may have been overlooked, reducing the overall spectrum of themes. To reduce this bias, multiple methods could have been used, as adding normalizing statements about negative experiences in the beginning of the interviews or conducting a longitudinal study to track participants' experiences over time. However, that would have exceeded the feasibility of this thesis. Nevertheless, as other

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discussed literature about NB individuals' experiences usually focuses on factors that decrease mental health, and pathologies, this study complements the existing literature.

As the researcher has a non-binary gender identity, and is part of the queer community, the value in integrating their experienced perspective into the research process, which also can help combat social desirability get acknowledged. This subjective insight may have enhanced the analysis, particularly in the coding process, through high sensitivity and perceptiveness. Embracing an insider perspective helped the researcher with the creation of themes, capturing participants unique dimensions of their experiences with RRs. This approach resulted in a comprehensive understanding, based on the researchers' familiarity with diverse factors of NB identities. Nonetheless, to minimize bias and obtain objectivity, collaborative efforts through discussing the themes with the supervisor were integral. During the consultations and interviews with the participants, positive feedback was received for navigating a pleasant and safe environment. This was achieved through the creation of a queer safe space and promoting egalitarian communication. In addition, the willingness of numerous NB individuals to participate in interviews underscores the inadequate representation in both research and broader societal contexts. Another strength is the qualitative research approach, which aims to obtain deeper insights and distinctive information about specific concepts, instead of aiming for generalizing the data to a broad population, as in quantitative research. This resulted in more in-depth themes regarding perceptions of unique factors that influence NB individuals' well-being in their RRs.

Considering the limitations and strengths of this study, there are some recommendations for future research. Firstly, it is essential to consider cultures, age groups, races, and additional societal factors to enhance intersectionality. This would contribute to a broader and more complete understanding of the role of RRs for well-being in various circumstances. Also, this approach enables the exploration of commonalities or differences among these demographic variables and emphasizes the benefits of intersecting multiple identities (Garcia & Zajicek, 2022). This also applies to gender identity, as this study purposefully differentiates between binary and non-binary gender identity. Therefore, future research should evaluate whether the well-being influencing factors from this research are unique to NB individuals or applicable to the broader trans population. Additionally future research should consider the sexual orientation and gender of the participants partners as those might influence the RR experiences. As the theme about gender related power

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imbalances indicates, different combinations within couples of genders and sexual orientations may lead to altered relationship dynamics.

The interviews of this study further contain a big richness of data, therefore future studies should analyze different aspects of it. The positive psychological approach and focusing on the perceptions of well-being, led to certain themes not being further concentrated on, even though valuable insights could be taken from them. Especially perceived struggles of the individuals related to their gender identification were disregarded as they did not necessarily focus on neither well-being nor the setting of RRs. Future research should therefore consider participants' perceptions of their self-definitions of their gender identity, gender expressions and relating conflicts and challenges.

Conclusion

Concluding, interviews with NB individuals were conducted in this research to explore their experiences of romantic relationships and the perceived role of these relationships on their well-being. Overall, the RRs are described as potentially beneficial for well-being. The participants perceived their RRs as purposeful, liberating from social gender norms, and as a safe space in which they experienced (self-)acceptance, gender affirmation, self-exploration, independence, and autonomy. Next to the well-being inducing effects, gender related power imbalances, especially in past RRs with cisgendered partners and purposeful misgendering were found to be well-being decreasing through decreased autonomy and environmental mastery. This shows the importance of a gender related power balance between RR partners and the high influence of gender identity on one's perspectives, experiences, and desires in relation to well-being. All dimensions of psychological well-being were described by the participants, showing that their RRs were able to positively influence self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, autonomy, purpose in life, and positive relations. Nonetheless, not all RR experiences were solely beneficially impacting the participants, making the quality of interactions dependent on the partners' acceptance, and their abilities to appropriately interact with NB individuals. This thesis provides valuable insights into queer RRs, (self-) acceptance, empowerment, and well-being among young NB individuals. Future research should aim to broaden the comprehension of the well-being of gender minorities, specifically focusing on NB individuals with intersections and within diverse cultural contexts. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the important role of gender affirmation, acceptance, and autonomy in RRs for fostering psychological well-being.

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Appendices

Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

FACULTY BMS

231355 REQUEST FOR ETHICAL REVIEW

Request nr: 231355
Researcher: Liebetruth, J.C.B.
Supervisor: Dekkers, T.
Reviewer: Klooster, P.M. ten
Status: Approved by commission
Version: 2

1. START

A. TITLE AND CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

1. What is the title of the research project? (max. 100 characters)

Experiences Of Non-Binary youth on romantic-relationships and
influences on positive Mental Health

2. In which context will you conduct this research?

Master's Thesis

3. Date of the application

03-11-2023

5. Is this research project closely connected to a research project previously assessed by the BMS Ethics Committee?

No/Unknown

B. CONTACT INFORMATION

6. Contact information for the lead researcher

6a. Initials:

J.C.B.

6b. Surname:

Liebetruth

6c. Education/Department (if applicable):

M-PSY

6d. Staff or Student number:

2238799

6e. Email address:

j.c.b.liebetruth@student.utwente.nl

6f. Telephone number (during the research project):

2023-11-16 15:46:02

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EXPLORING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF NON-BINARY YOUTH AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WELL-BEING

+4915755895182

6g. If additional researchers (students and/or staff) will be involved in carrying out this research, please name them:

-

6h. Have you completed a PhD degree?

No

7. Contact information for the BMS Supervisor

7a. Initials:

T.

7b. Surname:

Dekkers

7c. Department:

BMS-PGT

7d. Email address:

t.dekkers@utwente.nl

7e. Telephone number (during the research project):

+31534899741

8. Is one of the ethics committee reviewers involved in your research? Note: not everyone is a reviewer.

No

C. RESEARCH PROJECT DESCRIPTION

9a. Please provide a brief description (150 words max.) of the background and aim(s) of your research project in non-expert language.

This study is going to be a qualitative interview study, about the experiences of non-binary individuals (NB's) in romantic relationships (RR) and the influence on mental health & well-being. NB's are part of a gender minority group and experiencing discrimination and stress, which results in bad mental health & well-being. Positive relationships, like RR were found to be beneficial for well-being and serving as a protective factor against stress. This existing research was mainly based on cis-straight individuals or binary transgender individuals, leaving a research gap for this population. Finding out how the connection between RR and mental health & well-being gets experienced by NB's, could result in better representation, reducing stigma and creating massive options for enhanced mental health intervention and prevention. Furthermore, it will explore and provide valuable insights into specific experiences, benefits, as well as challenges and sources of well-being, with a positive psychological approach.

9b. Approximate starting date/end date of data collection:

Starting date: 2023-11-29

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End date: 2024-01-23

9c. If applicable: indicate which external organization(s) has/have commissioned and/or provided funding for your research.

Commissioning organization(s):

Not applicable

Funding organization(s):

Not applicable

2. TYPE OF STUDY

Please select the type of study you plan to conduct:

I will be collecting new data from individuals acting as respondents, interviewees, participants or informants.

4. RESEARCH INVOLVING THE COLLECTION OF NEW DATA

A: RESEARCH POPULATION

20. Please provide a brief description of the intended research population(s):

Needed participants will only consist of 4 non-binary individuals, who will get interviewed and whose experiences serve as base for the data analysis.

21. How many individuals will be involved in your research?

It will be 4 participants included. This study will work with semi-structured interviews, and qualitative thematic analysis, which means, the amount of information is rather incidental but the focus on meaning is important.

22. Which characteristics must participants/sources possess in order to be included in your research?

The individuals are identifying themselves as being non-binary, in terms of their gender identification. Further, the participants should be between 18-25 years old, to be considered as adolescents/ emerging adulthood, and should have experiences with RR. This includes NB's that have been in 1 or more relationships in the past year, or currently being in one or more RR. There will be given no specific definition for RR, but instead the participants will have to decide themselves if they consider themselves as experiencing RR. The participants should be aware and okay with talking openly about their relationship experiences.

23. Does this research specifically target minors (<16 years), people with cognitive impairments, people under institutional care (e.g. hospitals, nursing homes, prisons), specific ethnic groups, people in another country or any other special group that may be more vulnerable than the general population?

Yes

(please explain): It will include non-binary individuals, which are part of a minority group. Therefore, speaking about discrimination and

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mental health in the interviews could trigger, discomfort in participants, which will be taken with special considerations.

24. Are you planning to recruit participants for your research through the BMS test subject pool, SONA

No

B. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

25. What is the best description of your research?

- Interview research

26. Please provide a brief yet sufficiently detailed overview of activities, as you would in the Procedure section of your thesis or paper. Among other things, please provide information about the information given to your research population, the manipulations (if applicable), the measures you use (at construct level), etc. in a way that is understandable for a relative lay person.

In this research project, participants will engage in an interview, which is designed to gather data on non-binary individuals' perceptions of romantic relationships and their perceived impact on positive well-being and mental health. For data gathering, a convenience sample will get made. There will be an open shoutout on Instagram and whatsapp, asking for participants, with a description of conditions of participation, the topic and a brief instruction about the interview. From the volunteers who come forward, 4 individuals will be selected by lot. In the beginning of the interview conduction, the informed consent will be given, and talked about, so that there are no left open questions. Also, the participants will get informed that they can withdraw at any point without repercussions and will get fully informed about the purpose of the study. There will be no information necessary to hold back. The interview can take place in a quiet place of their choice. For example, a room at the University of Twente, or a quiet café. Then the participants will get asked open questions on specific topics, including their experiences in romantic relationships, their mental health, their well-being, their perceptions of social support through their partners, and discrimination or stigma. Potential follow up questions, as well as more specific probe questions can get asked, if the participant struggles with their answering. This will ensure certain richness of the described experiences. These interviews will explore their personal experiences and provide an opportunity for expressing their thoughts, insights, and feelings. During the interviewe the mentioned experiences get paraphrased by the researcher to test for understanding and if anything should get omitted. Throughout the whole process, the privacy and confidentiality of participants will get maintained. Rigorous measures will be implemented to ensure their comfort and security during the interviews, proactively addressing any concerns or questions they may have to create an supportive, open and

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honest environment and dialogue.

How much time will each participant spend (mention the number of sessions/meetings in which they will participate and the time per session/meeting)?

one session per Participant / around 45-60 minutes

C: BURDEN AND RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

27. Please provide a brief description of these burdens and/or risks and how you plan to minimize them:

To ensure the participants well-being, it is important to create a safe environment for them, with the help of inclusive language and ensuring of unconditional acceptance. There will always be the option to stop the interview, if the participants get triggered or get feelings of discomfort. Furthermore, also after the interview conduction, I will take the role as a contact person, if any doubts or unwellness will occur. Further the participants will get the contact details of the supervisor Tessa Dekkers and a phone number of an official helpline "TelefonSeelsorge" will get provided.

28. Can the participants benefit from the research and/or their participation in any way?

No

29. Will the study expose the researcher to any risks (e.g. when collecting data in potentially dangerous environments or through dangerous activities, when dealing with sensitive or distressing topics, or when working in a setting that may pose 'lone worker' risks)?

Yes

Please Explain:

Because I am the only researcher, I will be at lone worker risk, because I could get confronted with emotional experiences of a stigmatized group. As a prevention and safety measurement, I will be in close contact with my supervisor Tessa Dekkers. This is also my first contact person, if I will experience discomfort in any way. In severe case, I will get in contact with the student psychologist.

D. INFORMED CONSENT

30. Will you inform potential research participants (and/or their legal representative(s), in case of non-competent participants) about the aims, activities, burdens and risks of the research before they decide whether to take part in the research?

Yes

Briefly clarify how:

In the beginning of the interview, and consent form will be discussed together with the participant, which will fully inform them about the aim, interview procedure and potential risks. Any open questions will get clarified before the conduction.

32. How will you obtain the voluntary, informed consent of the research participants (or their legal representatives in case of non-competent participants)?

EXPLORING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF NON-BINARY YOUTH AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WELL-BEING

Signed

33. Will you clearly inform research participants that they can withdraw from the research at any time without explanation/justification?

Yes

34. Are the research participants somehow dependent on or in a subordinate position to the researcher(s) (e.g. students or relatives)?

No

35. Will participants receive any rewards, incentives or payments for participating in the research?

- No

36. In the interest of transparency, it is a good practice to inform participants about what will happen after their participation is completed. How will you inform participants about what will happen after their participation is concluded?

- Participants will receive the researcher's contact details, so that they can contact the researcher if they have questions/would like to know more.
- Participants will receive oral/written information about what the researcher(s) will do with the collected data.
- Participants who indicate they are interested will receive a summary of the research results.

E. CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

37. Does the data collected contain personal identifiable information that can be traced back to specific individuals/organizations?

No

39. Will you make use of audio or video recording?

Yes

- What steps have you taken to ensure safe audio/video data storage?

the interviews will get audio recorded, to later be able to transcribe and work with the data. It will get recorded with a recording device and directly after the interview conduction, the audio data will get uploaded into a safe transcription programm (Amberscript). There, the text, will get directly anonymized and marked with a number.

- At what point in the research will tapes/digital recordings/files be destroyed?

After finishing the thesis, the audio data will get deleted.

5. DATA MANAGEMENT

- I have read the UT Data policy.
- I am aware of my responsibilities for the proper handling of

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data, regarding working with personal data, storage of data, sharing and presentation/publication of data.

6. OTHER POTENTIAL ETHICAL ISSUES/CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

40. Do you anticipate any other ethical issues/conflicts of interest in your research project that have not been previously noted in this application? Please state any issues and explain how you propose to deal with them. Additionally, if known indicate the purpose your results have (i.e. the results are used for e.g. policy, management, strategic or societal purposes).

Till now, I am not aware of any other ethical issues/conflicts, than previously noted in this application

7. ATTACHMENTS

informed-consent-form.pdf, Interview Questions pdf.pdf

8. COMMENTS

Dekkers, T. (13-11-2023 10:04):

See comments shared over email.

9. CONCLUSION

Status: Approved by commission

The BMS ethical committee / Domain Humanities & Social Sciences has assessed the ethical aspects of your research project. On the basis of the information you provided, the committee does not have any ethical concerns regarding this research project. It is your responsibility to ensure that the research is carried out in line with the information provided in the application you submitted for ethical review. If you make changes to the proposal that affect the approach to research on humans, you must resubmit the changed project or grant agreement to the ethical committee with these changes highlighted.

Moreover, novel ethical issues may emerge while carrying out your research. It is important that you reconsider and discuss the ethical aspects and implications of your research regularly, and that you proceed as a responsible scientist.

Finally, your research is subject to regulations such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Code of Conduct for the use of personal data in Scientific Research by VSNU (the Association of Universities in the Netherlands), further codes of conduct that are applicable in your field, and the obligation to report a security incident (data breach or otherwise) at the UT.

EXPLORING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF NON-BINARY YOUTH AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WELL-BEING

Appendix B

Experiences of Non-Binary Young Adults

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking part in the study		
I have read and understood the study information dated [__/__/__], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that taking part in the study involves taking part in an interview, which will be audio recorded and transcribed. The audio recording will be deleted after the finish of the study.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Risks associated with participating in the study		
I understand that taking part in the study involves the following risks: discussing sensitive topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use of the information in the study		
I understand that information I provide will be used for the reporting in the thesis.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as [e.g. my name or where I live], will not be shared beyond the study team.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Consent to be Audio Recorded		
<i>I agree to be audio recorded.</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Future use and reuse of the information by others		
I give permission for the collected data about experiences, that I provide to be archived in transcripts so it can be used for future research and learning. The data will be archived anonymously.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

questions after the interview, you can contact me via mail j.c.b.liebetrutn@student.utwente.nl or supervisor Tessa Dekkers (t.dekkers@utwente.nl, +31534899741)

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher, please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee/domain Humanities & Social Sciences of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente by ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl

Consent Form for Study about Experiences of Non-Binary Young Adults

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

EXPLORING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF NON-BINARY YOUTH AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WELL-BEING

Signatures

Name of participant

Signature

Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

__Johanna Liebethuth__

Researcher name



Signature

Date

Study contact details for further information:

Please contact the researcher Johanna Liebethuth via mail

(j.c.b.liebethuth@student.utwente.nl) or supervisor Tessa Dekkers (t.dekkers@utwente.nl, +31534899741)