

## Framing discomfort on YouTube: Narratives of non-binary dysphoria

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In Western thinking, the binary gender system has long held a central position, often side-lining identities that exist beyond this binary framework. This facet of gender discourse frequently leads to the omission of non-binary individuals from discourses not only of gender, but more broadly of societal concern. As a result, it is not unusual for these individuals to experience discomfort, both in respect of their gender identity and in relation to societal expectations, often leading to gender dysphoria. It is no chance, in light of the above, that clinical definitions and comprehension of gender dysphoria predominantly center on a binary understanding of gender, even though the experience of gender dysphoria extends beyond this binary framework.

Over the past decade, social-media platforms have emerged as dynamic arenas where non-binary individuals can openly express their gender identities. In this context, social-media holds considerable influence as a potent tool (Angouri, 2021) for the construction and portrayal of non-binary identities online. Within this discourse, the articulation of discomfort with one's own physical appearance seems to be a recurring theme. This study explores the articulation of emotional discomfort among non-binary YouTubers, in relation to their gender experience. It employs a methodology relying on Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies (Gillings et al., 2023), using the Sketch Engine software (Kilgarrieff et al., 2014), to identify distinctive lexical patterns that characterize the expression of discomfort and dysphoria. The dataset includes YouTube videos from five channels owned by non-binary YouTubers, which could be considered, by virtue of their content and stated purpose, as explicit non-binary communicative gender performances.

The paper primarily investigates how discourse surrounding suffering and discomfort contributes to the portrayal of non-binary identities in online spaces, and seeks to observe whether the expression of this discomfort can be construed as a means of seeking validation for these identities within the social-media domain.

**Keywords:** non-binary; gender dysphoria; social-media; YouTube; discomfort; queer linguistics

## 1. State of the art

Gender dysphoria is generally recognised as a highly relevant issue for both individuals and society owing to its impact across diverse domains such as psychology, medical healthcare, sociology, and beyond. Its clinical definition is provided by the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders -DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association), which defines gender dysphoria in adolescents and adults as a marked incongruence between an individual's gender identity and their assigned gender, with associated distress or impairment. According to the latest DSM-5 (2022), in order to be diagnosed gender dysphoria must last at least 6 months and comprehend two of the following:

- A marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics -or in young adolescents, the anticipated secondary sex characteristics.
- A strong desire to be rid of one's primary and/or secondary sex characteristics because of a marked incongruence with one's experienced/expressed gender -or in young adolescents, a desire to prevent the development of the anticipated secondary sex characteristics.
- A strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics of the other gender
- A strong desire to be of the other gender -or some alternative gender different from one's assigned gender.
- A strong desire to be treated as the other gender -or some alternative gender different from one's assigned gender.
- A strong conviction that one has the typical feelings and reactions of the other gender -or some alternative gender different from one's assigned gender.

It is to be noted that the newer version of DSM-5 (2022), compared to its former version (2013), includes differentiations in the terminology used when discussing gender dysphoria. The updating conforms to the current preferred usage ("desired gender" is replaced with "experienced gender"; "natal male/natal female" with

“individual assigned male at birth” or “individual assigned female at birth”; and “cross-sex treatment regimen” with “gender-affirming treatment regimen”).

According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2022), the realm and definition of gender dysphoria extends far beyond the conventional terminology associated solely with binary transgender individuals and inclusively envelops the experiences of non-binary individuals. The APA, in underlining the importance of inclusivity, explicitly advocates for consideration of non-binary gender identities within the discourse on gender dysphoria.

While gender dysphoria has been the object of a considerable body of research in different fields (e.g. Atkinson & Russell, 2015; Zucker et al., 2016; Tosh, 2016; Johnson, 2018; Saksham et al., 2023), many of the existing studies have focused heavily on the experiences of binary transgender individuals, leaving out the unique perspectives of non-binary, and gender non-conforming, individuals. There is a risk that this view could limit and narrow our understanding of the phenomenon of dysphoria. Recently, there seems to have been a growing recognition of the need for more research in this area, especially considering the changing landscape of non-binary and non-conforming gender identities.

The nuanced experience of non-binary dysphoria has been thoroughly explored in the work of Galupo et al. (2021, 3). In their comprehensive examination, the authors discerned three overarching categories that encapsulate non-binary individuals’ perspectives on their gender and dysphoria. These categories serve to categorize the diverse ways in which non-binary individuals relate to and articulate their experiences:

1. No Gender Dysphoria: This category encompasses individuals who report having no issues with their bodies and do not experience dysphoria.
2. Dysphoria Related to Aspects of Gender/Sex: This category delves into the intricacies of dysphoria tied to various elements, such as the naming of gender identity, the acknowledgment of assigned sex, considerations of gender roles, and expressions.
3. Dysphoria Related to Aspects of the Body: This category delves into the complex relationship between dysphoria and physical attributes. It includes considerations of body shape, genitals, chest, secondary sex characteristics, hormones, and reproductive capability.

The scarcity of studies on non-binary dysphoria, primarily concerning healthcare aspects (Richards et al. 2016, Harry-Hernandez et al. 2020, Murawsky 2023) underscores a notable gap in understanding the holistic experience of non-binary individuals. While healthcare is undeniably crucial in this context, a linguistic examination offers a distinctive lens to comprehensively grasp the

discursive, sociological, and psychological dimensions inherent in the dysphoric experiences of non-binary individuals.

To grasp the concept of gender dysphoria within the context of this article, it is crucial to highlight the perspective and definition of gender that informs the present paper. In this sense, adopting a socio-constructivist perspective appears essential to enhance the comprehension of the nature and concept of gender identities, as described and defined in recent decades. According to Sunderland (2004, 10), gender identities are not fixed. Instead, they are actively shaped through a process that involves various cues like visuals, texts, or spoken language. In the complex landscape of gender dysphoria, considering the performative nature of gender, social-media have become a significant player. It provides a space where individuals can express their gender identities and engage with supportive communities, addressing issues that relate to gender identity, as gender dysphoria. Studies on gender identity and social-media have been widely conducted and gained a lot of attention in the most recent years, and the representation of non-conforming gender identities has attracted many researchers from different fields (e.g. Oakley 2016, Bussoletti 2021, Christy et al. 2023, O'Reilly-Kime 2023). Social-media platforms, conceived as virtual loci, allow individuals to express themselves freely to an audience, in a state of suspension between authenticity and performance (Pooley 2021, 2). Specifically, YouTube, owing to its inherent characteristics, facilitates a form of self-representation that is notably discursive and, at times, intimate. Notably, content creators on YouTube frequently choose domestic settings for video production, occasionally opting for intimate spaces such as their bedrooms (Horak 2014, Balleys et al. 2020). Direct communication with the camera, and by extension, with a virtual audience, is a common practice among YouTubers. These chosen discourse settings, coupled with the nature of the content shared, contribute to the creation of an intimate “confessional” video format (Balleys et al. 2020, 3) and create a sense of (staged) authenticity (Riboni 2020, 106).

## 2. Theoretical framework and aim

To date, there appears to be a lack of research focusing on linguistic patterns in gender representation processes, particularly within the realm of self-representation on social media. However, a notable trend has emerged in various linguistic disciplines towards employing approaches centered on uncovering discursive patterns to identify the ways in which individuals represent themselves and others. Corpus linguistics and the quantitative analyses of occurrences and co-occurrences, have facilitated critical examinations of normativity, also within the media landscape. This holds particular relevance for today's evolving

gender representation scenario, as media representations play a key role in establishing societal norms also through a sort of cumulative effect: the more a given discursive representation is featured in the media, the more likely it is that it is naturalized in society as “the norm” (Fairclough, 2014). Through the dissemination of dominant discourses and narratives, and the media plays therefore a pivotal role in shaping collective attitudes, behaviors, and identities, ultimately contributing to the maintenance and perpetuation of existing power relations in society. Within this scenario, discursive patterns of representation and self-representation of individuals in the media are especially relevant, with genre identity emerging as an increasingly important object of investigation in recent research (Marchi and Taylor, 2009; Baker and Levon, 2015; Milani, 2016).

This burgeoning field of research builds on a rich tradition within the realm of linguistic studies, there exists a rich tradition that delves into the intricate relationship between language, gender and sexuality. Scholars have long scrutinized lexical choices in how genders are depicted across various forms of media (e.g. Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; del Teso-Craviotto, 2006). More recent explorations extend beyond conventional cisgender representations, and also encompasses the portrayal of transgender individuals, thus reflecting a broader spectrum of gender identities (Zottola, 2018; Webster, 2019).

A considerable number of existing studies on the topic have a marked lexical focus. In the domain of gender representation, lexis has been found to represent a crucial element in determining textual macrostructure, contributing to the recognition of textual themes (Phillips, 1989; Gabrielatos, 2018). Understanding what a text is about entails a semantic interpretation based on the accumulation of lexical choices. The present paper starts from the premise that, far from being arbitrary, such choices are – at least in part – contextually determined, reflecting underlying social dynamics. In an effort to address questions pertaining to the self-representation of non-binary individuals from a pattern-oriented perspective, the investigation delves into dimensions of dysphoria. Leveraging these distinctions as a conceptual framework, the study aims to map selected users’ relationships with their gender dysphoria, if present, within the realm of YouTube content creation. By employing this categorization, it endeavors to provide a nuanced understanding of how non-binary individuals articulate, navigate, and frame their experiences of dysphoria (RQ1), as well as how they express their emotional discomfort about gender dysphoria (RQ2).

### 3. Data and method

In order to reach the overarching goals of this paper, data were collected from five distinct YouTube channels. The criteria for selection included all videos retrieved

from creators who owned a personal YouTube channel with a minimum of 50,000 subscribers, from 2016 to 2023. This choice was made to safeguard the privacy of smaller content creators whose published materials, though public, may be expected by their authors to be of limited outreach, and, as a result, less ‘public’ in the sense of widely known and discussed. This data collection is an essential component of a broader research, constituting my Ph.D. thesis. Ethical approval for this specific data collection was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the University of Milan. Although the videos under consideration are publicly accessible, their intimate nature, particularly as their central theme is the creators’ gender experiences, necessitates the safeguarding of individuals’ privacy. To ensure confidentiality and respect for the creators, the identifiers C1, C2, C3, C4, and C5 will be employed to refer to the respective YouTube creators throughout this analysis. A total of 64 videos were collected and subsequently transcribed. The transcription process unfolded in two stages. Initially, an automatic AI software was used, namely “Cockatoo.” Following this stage, each transcription underwent a manual refinement process, in order to correct any mistakes in the automatic AI transcription. This process resulted in transcribed text for a total of 148,262 tokens.

Building upon the elements identified in the research on non-binary dysphoria identified in the state of art, this paper’s focus has been directed toward the portrayal of these elements in the transcribed videos under consideration. Despite multimodal aspects of these videos being part of a more extensive project, this article will not include them as it aims to only observe discursive patterns that occur in spoken text.

TABLE 1. General information about selected content creators

Creator	Identifies as	Pronouns	Personal details
C1	Non-binary	They/them	Midwestern United States Caucasian 32 years old <sup>1</sup>

1 The inclusion of information regarding the content creators’ nationality, ethnicity, and age serves to clarify the demographic composition of the sample. It has to be acknowledged that, regrettably, intersectionality with respect to ethnicity was not observed, as all creators were Caucasian. Additionally, the disclosure of the content creators’ nationality underscores the linguistic diversity inherent in the analysis, as their contributions represent different varieties of English. Finally, details concerning the sex assigned at birth were omitted, as they were deemed to introduce a variable that could potentially detract attention from the focus of the article, which is to focus on the gender and gender dysphoria experiences of non-binary individuals as such, regardless of the sex assigned at birth.

Creator	Identifies as	Pronouns	Personal details
C2	Non-binary	All	Upper Midwestern United States Caucasian 31 years old
C3	Non-binary	She/her/he/him	Australia Caucasian 27 years old
C4	Non-binary	They/she/he	Sweden Caucasian 31 years old
C5	Non-binary Genderfluid	They/she	Canada Caucasian 24 years old

In the analysis of the aforementioned data, this study utilizes the Sketch Engine software (Kilgarrif et al., 2014), leveraging its capacity to organize collocation information based on grammatical relations. Rooted in principles of Corpus Linguistics (McEnery et al., 2011), the study seeks to identify distinctive lexical patterns characterizing the expression of discomfort and dysphoria. Specifically, the research employs a methodological approach known as Corpus Assisted Discourse Analysis, integrating mixed methods. This approach combines the robustness of corpus-assisted analysis with the depth of discourse analysis (Gillings et al., 2023), allowing for a comprehensive examination of linguistic nuances in the expression of dysphoric experiences. The integration of corpus linguistics (CL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) manages to address criticisms regarding data, context, and interpretation in both disciplines (Stubbs, 1996). Recently, this combination has gained traction, and allowing a combination of the two granted the chance to overcome the singular limits of the two methods (Baker et al., 2008, Mautner 2009b), leveraging CDA's qualitative depth and CL's quantitative breadth. Corpus linguistics, with its capacity to handle large volumes of data, is pivotal in this integration, enabling analysis beyond the scope of qualitative methods alone (Partington and Marchi, 2015).

The corpus was uploaded on SketchEngine, in line with the main purpose of observing recurring patterns in how dysphoria is represented by non-binary and gender non-conforming YouTube creators. This exploration involved the observation of frequencies through wordlists and the concordances that articulate the experience of dysphoria, by employing the Wordsketch tool. Within the Wordsketch analysis, the primary focus was on examining verbs with "X" as subjects, verbs with "X" as objects, nouns modified by "X" and modifiers of "X". While, as observed above, the lexicon of gender self-representation has been the

object of scholarly interest, most research has focused on lexical composition in a broad sense, without looking at lexico-syntactic patterns. To my knowledge, there is no record, to date, of studies examining patterns of this kind in self-representative discourse on social media platforms. The investigation moves past the analysis of single lexical items and focuses on the four overmentioned categories (i.e. verbs with “X” as subjects, verbs with “X” as objects, nouns modified by “X” and modifiers of “X”). These categories were selected to provide insights into prevalent linguistic patterns within self-representative discourse. However, it’s important to note that the specific categories chosen were determined based on their frequency within the analyzed corpus. This targeted approach is motivated by two main reasons:

- The examination of verbs with dysphoric body parts/elements as subjects or objects aims to delineate the passive or active roles these components, and the individuals associated with them, play in defining and experiencing their appearance, including potential dysphoric attributes;
- The observation of modifiers, particularly in the noun-modifier relation, is crucial for this study in order to understand how said body parts/elements are framed by non-binary creators. This aspect provides insights into the linguistic constructions used to articulate experiences of dysphoria and discomfort.

This methodological approach was selected because it was deemed suitable to provide an initial exploration of the linguistic nuances surrounding the representation of dysphoria for non-binary individuals on YouTube, by virtue of its ability to shed light on the active and passive dynamics of body parts/elements and their framing within narratives of dysphoria.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. *General corpus observation*

Upon initial observation of the collected corpus, the Sketch Engine Wordlist function was used in order to uncover the most frequently occurring nouns and verbs used in the corpus. This approach aims to establish a foundational basis for framing the most commonly used terms associated with dysphoria, which will be further explored in the analysis. From a preliminary overview of the frequency lists, it emerged that discussions revolving around body parts and dysphoria held prominence in the videos in C1, C2, C3, C4, and C5’s channels (refer to the document frequency in Table 1, with each video transcription considered as a distinct document).



FIGURE 1. *Noun* frequency list, SketchEngine (Kilgarriff, 2014)<sup>2</sup>

Noun	Frequency ↑ ↓	Frequency Per Million ↑ ↓	Noun	Frequency ↑ ↓	Frequency Per Million ↑ ↓	Noun	Frequency ↑ ↓	Frequency Per Million ↑ ↓
1 i	2,906	17,664.36 ...	19 day	197	1,197.48 ...	39 boy	119	723.35 ...
2 gender	738	4,485.99 ...	19 surgery	189	1,148.85 ...	38 experience	117	711.19 ...
3 people	677	4,115.20 ...	20 year	183	1,112.38 ...	37 life	115	699.04 ...
4 thing	531	3,227.73 ...	21 girl	178	1,091.99 ...	36 part	114	692.96 ...
5 time	408	2,480.06 ...	20 body	174	1,057.67 ...	39 man	111	674.72 ...
6 lot	356	2,163.98 ...	20 hair	162	984.73 ...	40 guy	109	662.57 ...
7 video	338	2,042.40 ...	20 question	158	960.42 ...	41 youtube	108	656.49 ...
8 way	319	1,939.07 ...	20 chandler	147	893.55 ...	42 spectrum	108	656.49 ...
9 ash	315	1,914.75 ...	20 bit	142	863.16 ...	43 friend	107	650.41 ...
10 tran	278	1,689.85 ...	21 dysphoria	136	826.89 ...	44 scar	103	626.09 ...
11 kind	241	1,464.94 ...	20 woman	133	806.45 ...	45 comment	102	620.02 ...
12 something	233	1,416.31 ...	20 name	131	796.29 ...	46 term	100	607.86 ...
13 pronoun	232	1,410.23 ...	20 sex	128	778.06 ...	47 anything	97	589.62 ...
14 person	214	1,300.82 ...	31 word	123	747.67 ...	48 channel	96	583.54 ...
15 identity	213	1,294.74 ...	30 someone	123	747.67 ...	49 chest	95	577.47 ...
16 music	203	1,233.95 ...	30 today	123	747.67 ...	50 grace	94	571.39 ...
17 um	200	1,215.72 ...	30 folk	122	741.59 ...			

As evident from the noun frequency list, various nouns can be associated with the subject of dysphoria, including terms such as surgery, body, hair, dysphoria, sex, scar, and chest. Although the present article does not extensively address this aspect, it seems significant to highlight that the most frequently occurring pronoun in the current corpus is the pronoun “I.” This observation aligns with the recognition that the portrayal of personal experiences on YouTube corresponds to a depiction of a personal and intimate (Horak 2014, 581) narration of one’s gender experience.

FIGURE 2. *Verbs* frequency list, SketchEngine (Kilgarriff, 2014)

Verb	Frequency ↑ ↓	Frequency Per Million ↑ ↓	Verb	Frequency ↑ ↓	Frequency Per Million ↑ ↓	Verb	Frequency ↑ ↓	Frequency Per Million ↑ ↓
1 be	9,248	56,214.74 ...	19 gonna	238	1,446.70 ...	35 give	112	680.80 ...
2 do	2,334	14,187.41 ...	19 take	218	1,325.13 ...	36 find	109	662.57 ...
3 have	2,026	12,315.21 ...	20 talk	204	1,240.03 ...	37 happen	103	626.09 ...
4 know	867	5,270.13 ...	21 mean	195	1,185.32 ...	38 watch	99	601.78 ...
5 feel	776	4,716.98 ...	20 love	193	1,173.17 ...	39 thank	83	504.52 ...
6 think	704	4,279.32 ...	20 start	186	1,130.62 ...	40 keep	82	498.44 ...
7 want	700	4,255.01 ...	20 wear	186	1,130.62 ...	41 understand	79	480.21 ...
8 go	645	3,920.69 ...	20 identify	169	1,027.28 ...	40 hear	74	449.82 ...
9 get	594	3,610.68 ...	20 need	163	990.81 ...	43 hope	69	419.42 ...
10 like	573	3,483.03 ...	21 put	153	930.02 ...	44 realize	69	419.42 ...
11 make	515	3,130.47 ...	20 let	149	905.71 ...	45 guess	64	389.03 ...
12 say	443	2,692.81 ...	20 tell	146	887.47 ...	46 show	63	382.95 ...
13 see	341	2,072.80 ...	20 call	137	832.77 ...	47 grow	62	376.87 ...
14 look	317	1,926.91 ...	21 help	122	741.59 ...	48 read	61	370.79 ...
15 come	286	1,738.48 ...	20 work	118	717.27 ...	49 refer	61	370.79 ...
16 use	280	1,702.00 ...	20 ask	116	705.12 ...	60 learn	60	364.72 ...
17 try	241	1,464.94 ...	20 change	114	692.96 ...			

2 As some instances of capitalization remained unaltered in the corpus, Sketch Engine at times identified “i” as a noun rather than as a pronoun. Consequently, it was incorporated into the noun frequency list, as directly retrieved from Sketch Engine. The total frequency for “i” as a pronoun was 4,306 (26,174.38 fpm).

This is also visible in the realm of verbs: consonant with the demands of representing one's experiences, it is particularly evident that verbs associated with emotions hold a high frequency (e.g., feel, like, want, love). This prevalence of verbs of feeling suggests a profound connection between the articulation of personal feelings and the construction of identity among the non-binary YouTube creators selected for this paper. Moreover, many of these verbs directly pertain to the expression of identity (e.g., look, wear, identify). Once again, the deliberate use of verbs that encompass both emotional and identity-related dimensions underscores the personal nature of self-representation within the non-binary community on YouTube.

#### 4.2. Narratives of gender dynamics

The intertwined nature of gender, sexuality, and social-media has been a subject of extensive exploration and interest. Several scholars (e.g. Marwick 2013; Duguay 2016; Berger et al. 2022) have investigated the ways social-media platforms allow and/or facilitate the representation of gender and sex identities. These elements emerge as prominent topics extensively discussed by the five YouTube creators, highlighting their significance in expressing personal gender narratives. This observation resonates with the understanding that YouTube represents a platform where individuals openly share intimate reflections and actively participate in personal discussions about their lived experiences, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender, dysphoria, and identity within the non-binary community. Therefore, before moving on to discourses surrounding dysphoria exclusively, it seems necessary to briefly display how the noun gender is framed in the corpus:

FIGURE 3. "Gender" Word Sketch ("modifiers of gender", "nouns modified by gender", "verbs with gender as object", "verbs with gender as subject"), SketchEngine (Kilgarrif, 2014)

modifiers of gender	Collocate	Freq	fpm	nouns modified by gender	Collocate	Freq	fpm	verbs with gender as object	Collocate	Freq	fpm	verbs with gender as subject	Collocate	Freq	fpm
		68	458.64			444	2,994.69			114	768.9			50	337.24
	grammatical	7	47.21		identity	94	634.01		be	28	188.85		be	28	188.85
	different	6	40.46		fluid	58	391.19		question	13	87.68		do	4	26.97
	binary	5	33.72		dysphoria	47	317		design	12	80.93		exist	3	20.23
	other	4	26.97		expression	35	236.06		express	6	40.46		feel	2	13.49
	opposite	2	13.49		euphoria	18	13.49		have	6	40.46		have	2	13.49
	multiple	2	13.49		fluidity	15	101.17		explore	4	26.97				
	new	2	13.49		binary	11	76.19		know	4	26.97				
	own	2	13.49		role	11	74.19		fix	3	20.23				
	non-binary	2	13.49		norm	9	60.7		identify	3	20.23				
					spectrum	7	47.21		put	3	20.23				
					presentation	6	40.46		affirm	2	13.49				
					unicorm	4	26.97		describe	2	13.49				
					confusion	4	26.97		change	2	13.49				
					therapist	4	26.97		see	2	13.49				
					therapy	4	26.97		feel	2	13.49				
					thing	4	26.97		make	2	13.49				
					diversity	3	20.23								
					envy	3	20.23								
					queerness	3	20.23								
					fuck	3	20.23								
					education	3	20.23								
					change	3	20.23								
					graph	2	13.49								
					clinic	2	13.49								
					patient	2	13.49								
					crisis	2	13.49								
					ideology	2	13.49								
					band	2	13.49								
					queen	2	13.49								

Delving into the Word Sketch of the word ‘gender’ it is possible to note prominent features in the framing of gender as an extremely multifaceted element. Prominently featured are nouns modified by gender, among which we find a high referencing to “identity”, “dysphoria” and “expression,” words that underline the intimate way in which gender is discussed and portrayed by the content creators. Furthermore, the use of “binary,” “fluid,” and “spectrum”, which are present throughout the corpus, suggests a conception of gender that is not a fixed reality, but rather a shifting element:

- (1) A non-binary person can also be born as intersex, so... Gender fluid is a more specific term, which basically means that your gender varies based on the day, the month, the year, the hour. So, you feel like you kind of fluctuate all around the *gender spectrum* and maybe even off it. (C1)
- (2) First, there’s Ari<sup>3</sup> who’s non-binary. For those of you who haven’t heard of this identity before, non-binary is both a specific identity and an umbrella term for genders outside the *gender binary*. (C5)

This seems to indicate a conscious effort to portray and display diverse gender experiences, laying the groundwork for an audience receptive to gender perspectives that move beyond the binary. In line with this, the table also unveils societal reflections on gender norms and roles through terms such as “norm,” “role,” and “pronoun.” The use of verbs related to gender is also worth noticing: verbs such as “explore,” “assign,” and “affirm” signify an active engagement with gender identity, highlighting the participatory nature of the individual in the statement of their gender.

This initial table lays the groundwork for a more targeted examination of the depiction of dysphoria. Having observed and verified the intimate representation of gender on YouTube, allowing space for both self-disclosure and discomfort, the next step is to observe the portrayal of dysphoria and, more precisely, the framing of bodily elements intricately linked to this experience.

#### 4.3. *The unconventional nature of non-binary dysphoria*

As previously noted, YouTube’s platform and its characteristics encourage the expression of deeply personal and sensitive subjects. In this exploration of a YouTube corpus for representations of dysphoria, the focus shifts

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3 The provided name in the example was altered to maintain the privacy of both the content creator and the person they are mentioning. This adjustment was made to uphold confidentiality and ensure a respectful approach to handling personal references in the content.

to understanding how non-binary individuals, grappling with their own experiences of dysphoria, depict this facet of gender experience. Previous research has shown that the dysphoria experienced by non-binary individuals defies transbinary-coded dysphoria (Murawsky, 2023). It transcends the conventional narrative of not fitting into one of the two binary categories of men and women, presenting a more intricate form of dysphoria that doesn't align with predefined expectations of appearing either masculine or feminine. This complexity presents a significant challenge, suggesting the absence of a uniform or standardized way in which dysphoria is experienced within the non-binary community.

FIGURE 4. Table of “dysphoria” Word Sketch (“modifiers of dysphoria”, “nouns modified by dysphoria”, “verbs with dysphoria as object”, “verbs with dysphoria as subject”), SketchEngine

modifiers of dysphoria	Collocate	Freq	fpm		Collocate	Freq	fpm		Collocate	Freq	fpm		Collocate	Freq	fpm
		76	512.60	nouns modified by dysphoria		0	0	verbs with dysphoria as object		58	393.19	verbs with dysphoria as subject		26	175.36
	gender	47	317					have	10	67.44		be	18	121.40	
	much	4	26.97					experience	9	60.7		surround	2	13.49	
	same	3	20.23					be	7	47.21		affect	1	6.7	
	extreme	2	13.49					feel	6	40.66		arise	1	6.7	
	chest	2	13.49					trigger	5	33.72		open	1	6.7	
	more	2	13.49					alleviate	4	26.97		help	1	6.7	
	secondhand	1	6.7					manage	3	20.23		feel	1	6.7	
	hip	1	6.7					gender	3	20.23		do	1	6.7	
	inside	1	6.7					highlight	2	13.49					
	severe	1	6.7					relieve	1	6.7					
	individual	1	6.7					minimize	1	6.7					
	transition	1	6.7					cross-dress	1	6.7					
	mean	1	6.7					navigate	1	6.7					
	actual	1	6.7					cause	1	6.7					
	most	1	6.7					bring	1	6.7					
	transgender	1	6.7					hear	1	6.7					
	drag	1	6.7					help	1	6.7					
	word	1	6.7					sleep	1	6.7					
	people	1	6.7												
	scar	1	6.7												
	social	1	6.7												
	body	1	6.7												
	little	1	6.7												
	trans	1	6.7												

A preliminary search was carried out using the Wordlist function with the query “dysphor\*,” resulting in two terms used in the corpus: “dysphoria” and “dysphoric”. However, an observation of both words revealed that instances of “dysphoric” did not significantly contribute to the framing of “dysphoria” by non-binary individuals, as they all referred to the subject. Consequently, the term “dysphoric” was excluded from consideration, as the outcomes did not align with the specific objectives of this paper.

Observing the Word Sketch table delineating the usage of the term “dysphoria” within the corpus, a particular narrative can be individuated. Foremost, among the collocates are modifiers of dysphoria, that to some extent underline the struggle associated with this experience (Murawsky, 2023) (see: much, extreme, severe, mean) and some modifiers refer to specific aspects of dysphoria that are experienced in relation to a certain part of the body (see: hip dysphoria, chest dysphoria, scar dysphoria), creating a “sub-domain” of dysphoria.

It is noteworthy to examine the active and passive verb relations to the concept of dysphoria, specifically verbs with dysphoria as subjects and verbs with dysphoria as objects (refer to Figure 4). Despite an undeniable presence of verbs having “dysphoria” as an object, it is interesting to observe how dysphoria is also depicted as an element that performs actions, underscoring its influence on the individual’s experience (see: surround, affect, open, do). This is visible in examples 3 and 4:

- (3) I thought gender dysphoria was specific to transgender individuals. *Gender dysphoria* also *affects people* who are non-binary, or people who are genderfluid, and I’ve for the longest time had days where I hated my boobs. (C2)
- (4) It’s really important to self-reflect and try to figure out what are those triggers, what are those things, that are making you feel uncomfortable, and then work around them to kind of create the identity that you feel is your true self on the inside. *Gender dysphoria* is really *arising* from the expectations that society has put onto us. (C5)

Contrarily, dysphoria is used as an object with verbs that involve a necessity of coping (see: alleviate, manage, relieve) with its presence. Furthermore, it is not surprising that dysphoria is represented as an experience that is object to verbs of feeling (see: experience, feel, trigger) both in their positive and negative meanings, as in example 5:

- (5) I will try it on just to show you how painful it is for me to wear. Can you see the uncomfy in my face? It’s there. Bleah. This taught me that not everything femme is fair game. Some things will *trigger dysphoria* and babydolls are not my jam. (C2)

This initial observation of the word “dysphoria” in the corpus offers a clearer picture of how it is perceived by individuals who experience it. It seems necessary to highlight that, at this juncture, this paper does not intend to circumscribe this type of dysphoric experience only within the borders of non-binary experience. Instead, it recognizes that, when compared to a general characterization of dysphoria, this specific type of experience and characterization could also extend to transfeminine and transmasculine experiences. However, as mentioned above, the difference between non-binary experience and transmasculine/transfeminine experiences seems to lie not so much in the general characterization of dysphoria as a concept, but in its seemingly non-linear description.

#### 4.4. *Between dysphoria and empowerment: framing “chest” and “hair”*

Prominent facets of YouTube representation of the non-binary subjects that have been selected, upon first observation of the corpus (see Tables 1 and 4), seem to center around hair, sex, and chest. While the significance of the chest in the context of binary gender representation has been already explored in research (Mehring et al., 2021), these discussions have traditionally focused on binary experiences. Notably, Galupo (2021, 7) sheds light on the crucial role of chest dysphoria in the experiences of non-binary individuals. This underscores the need to broaden our understanding of dysphoria, acknowledging its nuanced manifestations beyond the binary framework.

It is particularly noteworthy how these two aspects are discussed in the corpus. Beginning with the term “chest,” it is significant to observe that modifiers associated with the chest often pertain to surgical procedures (post-op, bloated, sore). This aspect is visible in the following examples:

- (6) I am going to go in the other room and try and put a binder over *my sore bloated chest*. It’s probably going to make me feel things and I’m probably going to talk about them. (C3)
- (7) Oh, so, my wife and I haven’t ruled out the option of me potentially carrying a child in the future, so we were wondering how, like, pregnancy works with like a *post-op chest* if I were to get pregnant and my body were to create the hormones that happen with pregnancy. If there would be - if it would affect my post-op chest in any way? (C4)

Simultaneously, as notable in Figure 5, experiences with the bodily element of the chest are diverse. The representations of the chest, including its size, are depicted with varying connotations, sometimes viewed positively and at other times negatively. While transmasculine and transfeminine individuals typically share a common expectation regarding chest modification to mitigate dysphoria, no discernible pattern emerges in the portrayal of non-binary dysphoria in relation to chest size. Consequently, despite all creators explicitly identifying as non-binary, their experiences with a flatter or larger chest exhibit considerable variation amongst them.

Similarly to dysphoria, the chest sometimes emerges as an active element, capable of causing internal conflict or, at times, alleviating the conflict with one’s own body, as in the following examples:

- (8) I know the tape is artificial, but for some reason when I put the strips on, *my chest looks* more natural and less plastic surgery. And that just feels

- really good to me. So, I might be one of those people who wears the tape like up to two years post-op. (C3)
- (9) Here’s a list of the times and ways your *pre-op chest has cost you strife*. When you’ve not been allowed to wear the clothes that make you comfortable. When you’re feeling yourself, but can’t take your eyes off the one thing in the mirror you hate. It ruins the whole night. When you’ve bound so much it physically hurts. When you need to take a break from binding and the sight of your chest is so jarring you don’t want to go in public. When you couldn’t breathe because you felt like you were holding a secret. You admitted to yourself privately that you wanted surgery but the thought of other’s disapproval suffocated you. When you’ve wanted to do very unhealthy things to erase your chest. (C4)

FIGURE 5. Table of “chest” Word Sketch (“modifiers of chest”, “nouns modified by chest”, “verbs with chest as object”, “verbs with chest as subject”), SketchEngine (Kilgarriif, 2014)

	Collocate	Freq	fpm		Collocate	Freq	fpm		Collocate	Freq	fpm		Collocate	Freq	fpm
modifiers of chest		30	202.34	nouns modified by chest		10	67.44	verbs with chest as object		39	263.04	verbs with chest as subject		15	101.17
	flat	10	67.44		reveal	2	13.49		have	12	80.93		be	11	74.19
	large	6	40.46		dysphoria	2	13.49		see	4	26.97		look	2	13.49
	post-op	3	20.23		surgery	2	13.49		show	3	20.23		cost	1	6.7
	flatter	2	13.49		bump	1	6.7		be	3	20.23		have	1	6.7
	blasted	1	6.7		hip	1	6.7		affect	2	13.49				
	sore	1	6.7		shape	1	6.7		want	2	13.49				
	contoured	1	6.7		area	1	6.7		compress	1	6.7				
	pre-op	1	6.7						erase	1	6.7				
	sensitive	1	6.7						restrict	1	6.7				
	current	1	6.7						remove	1	6.7				
	hair	1	6.7						flatten	1	6.7				
	great	1	6.7						reveal	1	6.7				
	body	1	6.7						hide	1	6.7				
									wish	1	6.7				
									look	1	6.7				
									love	1	6.7				
									say	1	6.7				
									know	1	6.7				
									make	1	6.7				

And again, similarly to dysphoria, the chest is often depicted as an object subjected to actions— it is affected, removed, erased, restricted, and compressed. Interestingly, within the corpus, elements related to the chest exhibit notable incongruities. Non-binary creators, particularly those assigned male at birth, may refer to chest contouring (“contoured” as a modifier of chest, Figure 5), with the aim of highlighting the chest area through makeup or surgery. However, probably due to the fact that the YouTubers assigned a masculine sex at birth were a minority in the corpus, most elements refer to a hiding of the chest. As a matter of fact, individuals who were assigned female sex at birth often pursue a flatter chest (e.g. through the use of binders or surgery). This variation highlights the diverse approaches non-binary individuals take in navigating chest-related dysphoria. This diversity underscores a key aspect of the non-binary experience— there is no singular narrative. The different strategies employed by individuals

with different assigned sexes at birth emphasize the multifaceted nature of the non-binary journey. It’s a reminder that non-binary experiences are inherently varied, resisting any attempt to be confined to a single narrative.

A similar trend becomes apparent when analyzing how the five non-binary YouTube creators relate to their body hair. Similarly to the portrayal of the chest, hair is more frequently presented as an object rather than a subject in a phrase (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. Table of “hair” Word Sketch (“modifiers of hair”, “nouns modified by hair”, “verbs with hair as object”, “verbs with hair as subject”), SketchEngine (Kilgarrif, 2014)

modifiers of hair	Collocate	Freq	fpm	nouns modified by hair	Collocate	Freq	fpm	verbs with hair as object	Collocate	Freq	fpm	verbs with hair as subject	Collocate	Freq	fpm
	ampit	15	101.17	removal	2	13.40		have	27	182.11		be	18	121.40	
	facial	13	87.68	mpio	1	6.7		cut	11	74.59		look	2	13.49	
	long	12	80.83	other	1	6.7		be	5	33.92		have	2	13.49	
	short	9	60.7	growth	1	6.7		dye	4	26.97		annoy	1	6.7	
	body	4	26.97	chromosome	1	6.7		grow	4	26.97		grow	1	6.7	
	purple	2	13.49	color	1	6.7		like	2	13.49		start	1	6.7	
	like	3	20.23	photo	1	6.7		hide	2	13.49		use	1	6.7	
	colored	3	20.23	product	1	6.7		style	1	6.7		make	1	6.7	
	get	3	20.23	look	1	6.7		contain	1	6.7		get	1	6.7	
	looky	2	13.49					met	1	6.7		do	1	6.7	
	tbody	2	13.49					wash	1	6.7					
	unshaven	1	6.7					despise	1	6.7					
	beard	1	6.7					color	1	6.7					
	half-shack	1	6.7					note	1	6.7					
	half-red	1	6.7					decide	1	6.7					
	tip	1	6.7					explain	1	6.7					
	blonde	1	6.7					share	1	6.7					
	colored	1	6.7					miss	1	6.7					
	arm	1	6.7					cover	1	6.7					
	underarm	1	6.7					have	1	6.7					
	brown	1	6.7					keep	1	6.7					
	white	1	6.7					love	1	6.7					
	random	1	6.7					get	1	6.7					
	point	1	6.7					weir	1	6.7					
	natural	1	6.7					feel	1	6.7					
	soft	1	6.7					get	1	6.7					
	people	1	6.7					do	1	6.7					
	bright	1	6.7												
	dark	1	6.7												
	straight	1	6.7												
	surgery	1	6.7												
	hair	1	6.7												
	much	1	6.7												
	big	1	6.7												
	other	1	6.7												

The table highlights patterns in how individuals express their relationship with hair (body hair, and head hair<sup>4</sup>) in YouTube videos. In many instances, HH appears to be an object of modification, as seen in verbs such as “cut,” “dye,” and “style.” Interestingly, the corpus suggests that BH is not the sole hair capable of provoking dysphoria, as visible in the following example:

- (10) For me, I’ve *struggled with my hair, chest, hips*, and a ton of social things. Let’s talk about hair because that dysphoria is completely gone. Before *I cut my hair*, I was constantly and debilitatingly fixated, and anxious, about my appearance because I could never recognize myself in the mirror, and I didn’t even realize that was what was happening at the time. (C1)

4 For the sake of convenience, body hair will henceforth be referred to as BH, while head hair as HH.



However, upon closer examination of the majority of said instances in the corpus, the five content creators predominantly employ HH and refrain from shaving BH as a means of empowerment and an expression of their non-conforming gender identity, somehow turning their dysphoria into a strength. This choice not only challenges societal norms but also transforms the potential for dysphoria into a source of strength. Consider the following example:

(11) So, I bought roll-on stuff and spray, and that worked great. But my armpit hair is kind of like comparable to my leg hair, as far as like hygiene goes. Oh, *I don't shave my leg hair* for any of you that didn't know that. I've made a video about that before. But a lot of you are new, so, I don't shave my legs. And like my legs, my fluffy arms didn't feel dirtier or stinkier, just the tiniest bit sweeter. And only when I forgot to wear product. (C3)

Among the column referring to the term “hair” in an object position, noteworthy observations include references to both BH and HH. Specifically, verbs like “hide,” “despise,” and “shave” shed light on the perception of hair as something that not only provokes very negative feelings but also needs to be hidden, underscoring its role in accentuating the sense of uncomfortableness, very similarly to the reference of chest “erasure” (see example 9).

It is noteworthy that, unlike the portrayal of the chest, the selected content creators (either assigned female or male sex at birth), identifying as gender non-conforming, depict hair as something requiring concealment or modification when experiencing dysphoria.

#### 4.5. Dissociating “sex” from “identity”

FIGURE 7. Table of “sex” Word Sketch (“modifiers of sex”, “nouns modified by sex”, “verbs with sex as object”, “verbs with sex as subject”), SketchEngine (Kilgariff, 2014)

	Collocate	Freq	ipm		Collocate	Freq	ipm		Collocate	Freq	ipm		Collocate	Freq	ipm	
modifiers of sex			30	256.30	nouns modified by sex		27	182.11	verbs with sex as object		47	317	verbs with sex as subject		14	94.42
	biological	24	161.87		characteristic	4	26.97		have	16	107.91		be	10	67.44	
	period	3	20.23		change	3	20.23		assign	11	74.19		dictate	1	6.7	
	safe	2	13.49		expect	2	13.49		be	4	26.97		need	1	6.7	
	people	2	13.49		organ	2	13.49		enjoy	2	13.49		need	1	6.7	
	bio	2	13.49		curriculum	2	13.49		classify	1	6.7		do	1	6.7	
	assigned	1	6.7		category	2	13.49		recognize	1	6.7					
	assigned	1	6.7		life	2	13.49		declare	1	6.7					
	gay	1	6.7		biology	1	6.7		surprise	1	6.7					
	identity	1	6.7		act	1	6.7		interrupt	1	6.7					
	other	1	6.7		vid	1	6.7		match	1	6.7					
					book	1	6.7		regard	1	6.7					
					education	1	6.7		hear	1	6.7					
					store	1	6.7		think	1	6.7					
					language	1	6.7		like	1	6.7					
					video	1	6.7		say	1	6.7					
					person	1	6.7		know	1	6.7					
					people	1	6.7		get	1	6.7					
					expression	1	6.7		do	1	6.7					

Finally, the term “sex” is very frequent within the corpus (see Table 1). Primarily associated with the biological aspect of sex, it could be argued that sex stands out as the core element in the experience of dysphoria. Unsurprisingly, references to biological sex are the most prevalent concordances in the corpus. In contrast to elements such as chest and hair, however, there is a notable scarcity of emotive language associated with the representation of sex. Instead, a strategic use of modifiers, such as “biological,” “bio,” or “assigned,” is observed. This strategic choice aims to dissociate sex from being a direct referent for identity. Individuals frame it as either biological or assigned, portraying it not as a defining aspect of their identity but rather as a physiological attribute—one that may not necessarily be embraced or appreciated.

- (12) Gender dysphoria is distress or unhappiness experienced because one’s gender does not match their *sex assigned* at birth. (C4)
- (13) Cisgender, I would say, is probably the majority of people. But I don’t know anymore if that is even true. Cisgender means that your *biological sex assigned at birth* correlates with your gender identity. For example, if you were assigned the *biological sex* of a male when you were born, your gender identity would be a boy or a man. Similarly, if you were born female, you would say that you identify as a girl. (C3)

This intentional distancing becomes more pronounced when examining the verbs associated with the term “sex” as the object. Actions such as “classify,” “assign,” or “declare” are employed, indicating a deliberate endeavour to establish a clear distinction between the concept of sex and its direct association with identity. These verbs imply an active effort to portray sex not as an inherent identifier of one’s identity but rather as a mere biological categorization, emphasizing a detached perspective. This nuanced use of language contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate discussions around sex in the context of dysphoria within the corpus. An additional point of interest, though beyond the scope of this discussion, relates to the definitions of dysphoria and biological sex in the mentioned cases. These definitions seem to hinge on a binary categorization and raise questions about the broader conceptualization of dysphoria and the inherent binary nature attributed to biological sex.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The exploration of gender dysphoria within the non-binary community, as evidenced by the selected YouTube content creators, opens a space for new research. The study’s conceptual framework, drawing from the categorization by Galupo et al. (2021, 3), aimed to give a first hint of the nature of non-binary dysphoria as discursively

portrayed. Galupo's identified categories of dysphoria related to aspects of the body and aspects of gender/sex — offer a lens to begin understanding how non-binary individuals articulate and navigate their dysphoric experiences.

The frequencies and patterns observed in the corpus underscore the role of the body parts and elements of “chest”, “hair” and “(biological) sex” in framing non-binary individuals' perception of their dysphoria. The approach adopted in the present study allowed for an initial comprehension of the dynamic interplay between gender non-conforming individuals and their experience with dysphoria. Furthermore, the data underscores that the representation of non-binary identity is not inherently linked to aspiring to appear as conventionally masculine or feminine. Instead, it involves a deliberate departure from the traditional binary norms, where individuals seek to amalgamate both masculine and feminine characteristics, thereby negating those associated with their assigned-at-birth sex.

The analysis of the presented data suggests the hypothesis that, unlike binary transgender individuals who may navigate towards a specific gender presentation, non-binary individuals seem to prioritize a departure from the constraints of their sex assigned at birth.

This study aims to contribute to the expanding discourse on non-binary dysphoria by offering a holistic exploration of linguistic and discursive aspects of self-representation within the context of social-media. The incorporation of diverse non-binary content creators ensures a representative sampling, providing an initial idea of patterns and differences that recur in non-binary experiences. As a matter of fact, this analysis of non-binary discourse uncovers recurrent patterns in how dysphoria is expressed, underlining the seldom active, and mostly passive roles of dysphoric body parts/elements involved. Additionally, the examination of gender representation and the role of social-media enriches the understanding of the interconnectedness of dysphoria, gender, and identity.

While exploring the realm of gender identities, acknowledging the experiences of non-binary individuals becomes imperative. The findings of this study pave the way for further research into the linguistic, psychological, and social dimensions of non-binary dysphoric experiences, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of gender diversity.

It is important to note that this study is inherently exploratory and specific to the individuals studied. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and incorporating diverse perspectives to ensure a comprehensive understanding of non-binary experiences. Moreover, acknowledging the inherent multimodality of social-media platforms like YouTube signals the need for further exploration into the intricate interplay between diverse modal elements in the discourse on non-binary experiences. Finally, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations associated with the Sketch Engine outputs.

Notably, references to elements such as hair, chest, and sex may be indirect, which means that they would not be immediately identified through automated lexical retrieval. To gain a more nuanced understanding of non-binary dysphoria, further investigation into these aspects- capable of identifying such indirect references -is required. By addressing these elements in future research, scholars can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of gender diversity and dysphoric experiences within the non-binary community.

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