

EXPLORING NON-BINARY
IDENTITY THEORY IN THE
AGE OF THE INTERNET
OR
WHY TUMBLR MIGHT BE
RIGHT ABOUT
SOMETHING FOR ONCE

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I am not a boy, nor am I a girl. This work is about that.

This work is also about the ways in which we present ourselves to the world on a daily basis, the clothes we choose to wear and the messages we want to send by wearing them. It's about all the things I want to say to everyone every day, but can't: yes, this is me; no, I don't know exactly why; yes, it's a real thing, I promise.

These are my actual clothes, the ones I wear on a daily basis. (So please be gentle with them.) After I came out as non-binary a few years ago, my appearance changed drastically; I cut off my long, beautiful hair (much to my mother's chagrin), and my blouses and skinny jeans gave way to black tees and track pants. It was my way of distancing myself from the girl I once was, an act of reclamation over my identity. I was never excluded or rejected from my community because of my gender (or lack thereof); but I felt, and still feel, anomalous. Improbable. And I dressed to reflect that.

The text is comprised from things I've said, things said to me, quotes from strangers on the internet, passing thoughts, affirmations, declarations, outbursts—a collective experience of what it means for me to be non-binary. I've taken the meaning of the clothes from the internal to the external.

Now, what do you wear?

Sidney H

The social microblogging site tumblr is a popular place for young queer individuals to explore their gender identities through text-based discourse. In the past several years, many methods of self-labeling gender have come into use, some more practical than others. Here, I've used my own genderqueer¹ experience, queer theory, and internet trends to track the how and why of internet-specific neo-gender identities – specifically, the ways in which users label themselves personally. In this paper I intend to analyze the most bizarre online gender identities using gender and cultural theory as a lens to further the general understanding of the non-binary community and to establish neo-gender labels as an important and necessary step in the evolution of our society's understanding of gender.

¹ A quick disclaimer: I will be using the words “non-binary” and “genderqueer” interchangeably throughout this article to describe people whose gender identities do not fit into the traditional male-female gender binary. Many people who identify outside the binary do not identify with the labels of genderqueer or non-binary. Not all non-binary people identify as genderqueer and vice-versa.

Some backstory on why anyone in their right mind would willingly go back onto tumblr

From the ages of about thirteen to fifteen, I was an active participant on tumblr. There. It's out there now. Now you know it.

I consider myself a citizen of the Internet, and for those couple of years my home was tumblr.com (spelled with a lowercase t). I'm loathe to admit this because it only reinforces the stereotype I was; a weird fourteen-year-old art girl with short hair questioning her gender and sexuality, browsing through tumblr, sharing GIFs of Pokémon and being indoctrinated by those damn Social Justice Warriors. (For those uninitiated, tumblr is infamous for its young, extremely liberal, and often toxic userbase, but that's an article for another day.)

On tumblr, each user gets a blog, a place where they can post original content as well as "reblog" other blog's content. Tumblr, unlike Facebook, is largely anonymous. Next to nobody has their full name on their blog. You follow the blogs you're interested in, and their content is funneled into your dashboard, a never-ending flow of information from dozens of blogs and hundreds of sources. You cannot comment, you can only reblog with your commentary attached, a feature that holds blogs accountable for what they choose to say.

Then in the ninth grade, I started identifying as non-binary. Despite my tumblr roamings and the two non-binary friends I'd made, I hadn't really thought about alternative gender identities as they applied to me. But almost as soon as I was introduced to the concept of non-binary, I knew that it fit me the best. I had never really felt "like a girl," whatever that means, but I went along with the label because I simply didn't know there was any other option. When I heard it was possible to ditch the labels of binary gender, I went, "Great! Don't need 'em. Let's move on."

I was still on tumblr, where I discovered a huge community of non-binary people, like nothing I'd seen on Facebook or Instagram. When I felt unsure about my gender, I hopped onto tumblr to see what people were saying about questioning the gender binary. When I felt invalid because of my gender (or nebulous lack thereof), I hopped on tumblr for affirmation. And when I had a free moment, I hopped on tumblr out of habit.

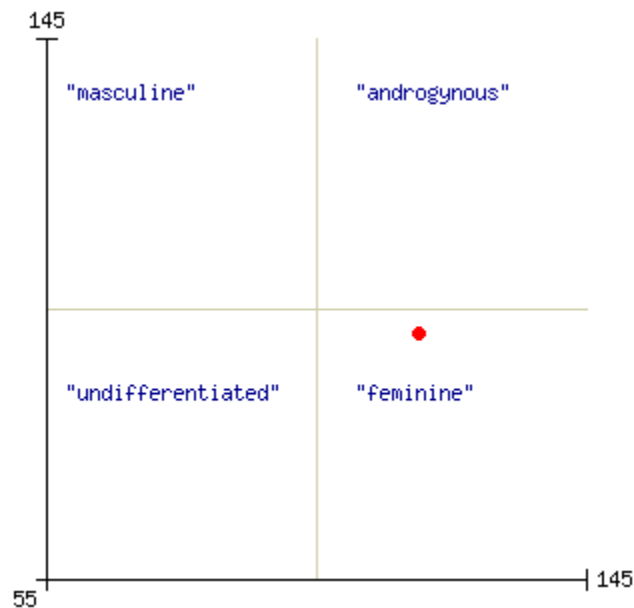
Although I haven't used tumblr regularly since 2015, it remains one of the primary internet breeding grounds for novel ideas about gender identity. Of course, tumblr isn't the only place that young queer people engage in internet discourse— it's just the most prevalent one. Its format allows off-the-cuff posts from casual bloggers to reach thousands of young, enthusiastic viewers in less than a day, with each relogger having the opportunity to add their own thoughts to the mix.

Now, a couple years after the fact, I'm more confident in my non-binary identity than ever. No matter how much of a stereotype it has become, tumblr has shaped a very important part of my life, I believe, for the better. I'm still curious about modern nontraditional gender identities, so I've decided to delve back in and see what's going on in the insulated gender realm of tumblr.com.

A very, very brief history of non-binary identity and theory in Western culture

While non-binary identities and gender expansiveness have been present in cultures around the world throughout history (particularly male-assigned individuals who take on the societal characteristics of womanhood), the concept of deliberately focusing on the queering of gender in Western society is relatively new. The exploration of gendered personalities and gender roles has been going on since the mid- to late-20th century, most notably with feminist psychologist Sandra Bem's gender schema theory and the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI),

which, based on a quiz, places individuals on a two-axis scale of masculine and feminine gender roles. Bem surmised that highly adaptable individuals had high masculine and feminine characteristics, rather than all of one or the other.



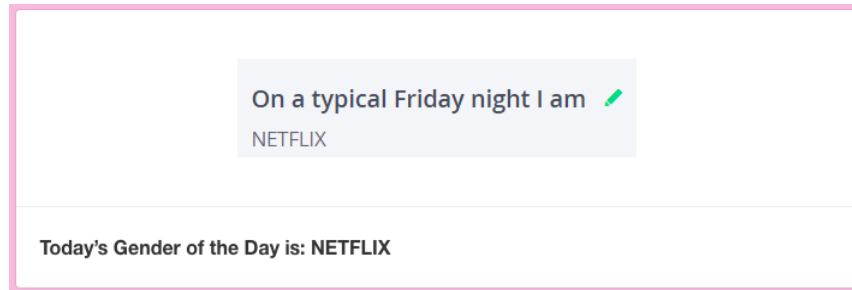
My placement on the masculine-feminine scale from [one online copycat BSRI test](#). There are lots of different BSRI-based tests on the internet, so I take it with a grain of salt.

The word “genderqueer” was first used to describe non-binary individuals in the early- to mid-1990s. Judith Butler’s famous book on performative gender and subverting the binary, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, – in which she purports that “There is no reason to assume that gender...ought to remain as two”– came out in 1990. Kate Bornstein, transgender (and now non-binary) pioneer, published *Gender Outlaw* for the first time in 1994, in which she goes beyond the male-to-female and female-to-male trans binary, creating an all-encompassing group of “gender outlaws,” or those that don’t fit into the traditional narrative gender schema. The visibility of genderqueer individuals in the queer community grew throughout the early 2000s, although the concept was still largely ignored by mainstream society. From then on, the genderqueer population has become steadily more recognized, with the advent of internet activism, the Intersex and Genderqueer Recognition movement, and books like Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. Over the past year or so, great gains have been made for non-binary people: the gender-neutral singular pronoun “they” has been adopted by many educational institutions and was named the Word of the Year of 2015 by the American Dialect Society. (Fun fact: their 2016 Word of the Year, published this January, was “dumpster fire.”) Recently, there have been the first legal recognitions of non-binary individuals in America: Jamie Shupe of Oregon and Sara Kelly Keenan of California. A new bill proposed in California, SB-179, would allow a third non-binary gender as an option on state documentation. It is a very exciting time to be non-binary in America.

And now, what you’ve all been waiting for

With the platform of the internet, genderqueer people have an opportunity to express their gender in new and unique ways. One of my favorite things about the tumblr non-binary and trans community that I’ve found is something I like to call “gender absurdity.” The tumblr blog

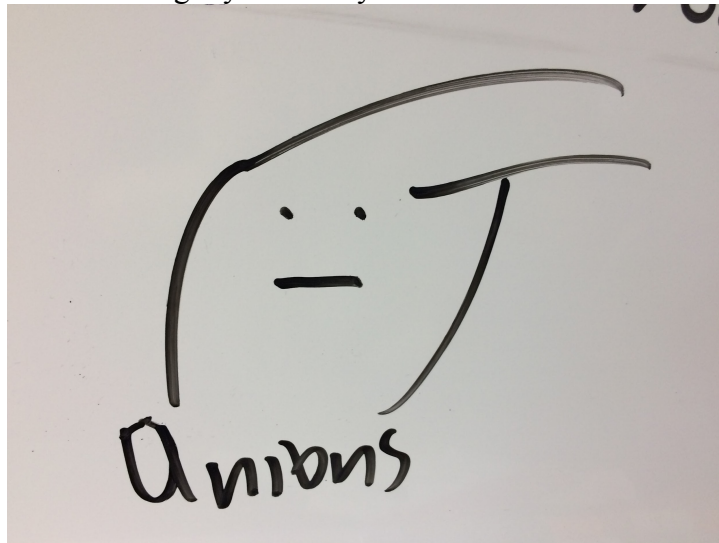
Gender Of The Day is a good example of this, featuring out-of-context genders of the day such as “Gender Neutral Milk Hotel,” “NETFLIX” and “{ Barry x Adam } Bee Movie AMV: Bring Me To Life.”



a screenshot from genderoftheday.tumblr.com

Jasmine Xie, a linguistics graduate from Carnegie Mellon, wrote her senior thesis on non-binary identity construction on the internet in 2015. In it, she coins the terms “fantastic” and “null” gender identities. Fantastic gender identities use mythical, opposing, or nonsensical terms to describe a gender identity that can’t be defined using “normal” terms. Xie uses the example of “small witch boy,” a gender moniker that combines two oppositely gendered terms while also referencing the supernatural. “Null” gender identities closely resemble what I refer to as gender absurdity. Examples include the aforementioned Gender of the Day as well as statements I’ve actually made in the past, including but not limited to:

- “My gender is an equilateral triangle,”
- “My gender is me yelling quietly for fifteen minutes,” and even
- “My gender is this drawing my chemistry teacher did of an onion labeled ‘Anions.’”



This one.

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” I hear you say. “How can your gender be a poorly drawn picture of an anthropomorphic onion?” The short answer is: it’s not.

The long answer is that null gender terms, or gender absurdity, are used by non-binary people as a way to troll, subvert, and generally mess with the gender binary. It’s important to note that many non-binary people’s genders are not taken seriously online, so why not make it fun? If your gender is unexplainable, why try to explain it? The use of memes and nonsensical

phrases in the context of gender acts as a distorted mirror held up to normalized conventions, quite similarly to the “theatre of the absurd” popularized by such playwrights as Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, 1953) and Harold Pinter (*The Birthday Party*, 1960). This particular phenomenon may have best been described by Martin Esslin in his 1960 writing on the theatre of the absurd: “If the dialogue in these plays consists of meaningless clichés and the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases--how many meaningless clichés and stereotyped phrases do we use in our day-to-day conversation?” (Esslin 5) And so, if our gender identities consist of inside jokes and unrelated phrases (such as “mind the gap”)-- what does that say about the arbitrary construction of the two-and-only-two gender convention?

Humor and absurdity can soften the blows of the everyday frustration of constant misgendering or the stress of being in the closet, and the internet, especially tumblr, provides an opportune place to channel that: anonymous, and often humor-oriented, full of supportive people in similar situations. As well as making fun of the gender binary, null identities serve as a way to deconstruct and problematize the binary in reaction to its enormous prevalence in everyday life. As Xie puts it, null identities “interrogate the assumed necessity of having a ‘public’, or knowable gender, and react to the pressure of ‘needing’ to be ‘out’ to cisgender people” (Xie 10).

Apart from fantastic and null gender identities, there’s another category of gender identity that’s cropped up over the last few years on tumblr. This is sometimes known in online communities as the “76 Genders” phenomenon. While gender absurdity seeks to pervert the set of existing gender labels, some are trying to expand it to include labels for every kind of gender experience. The best example of this is hosted on the tumblr account “Genderfluidsupport”, and includes over 100 examples of gender labels. This includes labels that have already been identified, such as cisgender, agender, and genderfluid, but also contains a whole host of gender identities that likely have never seen the light of day outside the internet:

- Autogender: a gender experience that is deeply personal to oneself
- Existigender: a gender that only exists or feels present when thought about or when a conscious effort is made to notice it
- Egogender: a gender that is so personal to your experience that it can only be described as “you”

I chose these three as examples because they all actually apply to me. But I don’t identify as any of these because it’s simply not practical for me to describe all those feelings when asked, “What’s your gender?”

Similarly, I’ve researched many of these gender identities and most of them don’t show up anywhere on the internet except for that one masterlist. It’s quite probable that only one person, or maybe even no people, identify wholeheartedly with most of these labels. There’s another master list that has to do with sexual/romantic orientation that has dozens of entries as well.

So if most of the genders on this list aren’t in regular use, what’s the point of naming them? Common criticisms include that this gender master list is absurd, naïve, and downright unaware. It seems as if these tumblr folks, these “special snowflakes” living inside their bubble of followers and following, have detached themselves from reality as we know it in order to fulfill some utopian gender fantasy.

But it’s possible that Genderfluidsupport may be onto something with the proliferation of these niche gender identity labels. Sandra Bem, the late feminist psychologist I mentioned earlier who theorized on gender and androgyny, makes a compelling argument for this. According to Bem, one solution to the permeating idea of the gender/sexuality binary (and hence,

gender/sexuality inequality) could be to “turn the volume up” on gender rather than minimizing it:

I propose that rather than trying to dismantle the two-and-only-twoness of gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality by eliminating gender categories, we instead dismantle that two-and-only-twoness by exploding or proliferating gender categories. In other words, I propose that we let a thousand categories of sex/gender/desire begin to bloom in any and all fluid and permeable configurations and, through that very proliferation, that we thereby undo...the privileged status of the two-and-only-two that are currently treated as normal and natural. (Bem 330)

Essentially, Bem is hypothesizing that trying to go “backwards” away from gendered labels would be much harder and maybe less effective than going “forwards” into a new world of neo-genders. The categories of “men” and “women” don’t seem to be going away anytime soon, so to take away their monopoly on identity, perhaps the best option is to saturate the market, so to speak. Personally, I don’t see this happening anytime in the foreseeable future, but I could be underestimating the flexibility of our culture, especially in the age of the internet; Facebook, for example, already lets users choose from over 70 different gender markers, including gender variant, gender nonconforming, and androgyne. (Although, to be fair, many of the options are slightly differently worded versions of others, as it includes both “cisgender woman” and “cis woman,” etc.) In any case, I think that this may be an unexpected but useful tactic in deconstructing the gender binary (incidentally, one of my favorite hobbies).

Although I (albeit presumptuously) doubt that the moderators of Genderfluidsupport have read this particular writing of Bem’s, their philosophy follows much the same path: let gender categories spring up wherever our feet fall, let them multiply and proliferate, until it’s evident that there are as many gendered experiences as there are individuals. While the list of 100+ genders may not be all that practical, it forces its readers to question the nature of the traditional categories of gender that we so often blindly accept. So really, this trend goes far beyond “making up genders.” It’s part of a time-honored tradition in queer history: of calling attention to unseen normativities by dismantling them ourselves.

Some more information on why anyone in their right mind would do this

It may seem a fruitless task to identify and categorize the ways in which (primarily) teenagers describe their gender on the internet. And in a way, it is – there’s no way I’ll ever be able to contain every type of gender description in one study. But this isn’t about trying to name names; it’s about trying to understand what tools genderqueer youth are using to identify outside the binary with the internet as a conduit. Nina Wakeford writes in *Cyberqueer* on the rising LGBT+ communities on the web, “The importance of a new space is viewed not as an end in itself, but rather as a contextual feature for the creation of new versions of the self” (Wakeford 411). The same holds true on tumblr; we get to invent and reinvent ourselves however we like, in whatever fashion we like.

So what does this mean for the future of genderqueer identity? As I’ve mentioned before, these trends in identity will probably not make the leap from the internet to the outside world, at least not in the foreseeable future. The non-binary population still has a long way to go, from getting legal gender recognition to simply convincing people that we exist. But for now we have

the unique opportunity to share with each other our gendered (or agendered) experiences through the internet, allowing the genderqueer community to flourish even while it's largely ignored in "real life."

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The BSRI-like test I took online:

<http://personality-testing.info/tests/OSRI/>