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Digital Gender Disidentifications: Beyond the Subversion Versus Hegemony Dichotomy and Toward Everyday Gender Practices

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The 21st century has seen the emergence of new practices of gender diversity that eschew a rigid gender binary and proliferate new gender labels, including “nonbinary,” “genderfluid,” and “agender.” Digital media have played a crucial role in this process as the new labels often originate and become popular in online social networks. Academic discussions on digital gender diversity suggest that the new labels either resist or reproduce the dominant gender ideology. I contribute to these discussions by challenging the subversion versus hegemony dichotomy, and by demonstrating a wide spectrum of practices of gender diversity. Drawing on six interviews with gender-diverse migrants and building on the concept of disidentification, I update the concept to include increasingly digital societies and new gender practices, challenge the dichotomous thinking about digital gender diversity, and stress the importance of cultural and media contexts for understanding how new gender labels are being practiced in everyday life.

Keywords: disidentifications, gender diversity, gender identity, migrants, nonbinary, social media, queer

The 21st century has observed the emergence of new practices of gender diversity, which eschew a rigid gender binary and proliferate new gender labels, including “nonbinary,” “genderfluid,” and “agender.” *TIME* magazine declared the year 2014 as “the transgender tipping point” (Steinmetz, 2014) in recognition of growing trans visibility in U.S. mainstream media (Cavalcante, 2018). In 2019, *The New York Times* reported that nonbinary identity had been “slowly seeping into societal consciousness” in “just the last few years” (Bergner, 2019, para. 21). Reflecting on those developments, a long-standing trans academic and activist Riki Wilchins (2017) asked in *The Advocate*, “Is trans over?”, suggesting that older discourses around

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transgender issues—often related to the right to change sex or have one’s correct gender recognized—are becoming insufficient for contemporary discussions about gender. Wilchins (2017) anticipated a scenario in which “we are unconsciously and finally treading toward the end of gender” (para. 20).

Wilchins (2017) may be correct in forecasting the end of gender as we know it, but gender as such has, in recent years, become a prolific terrain of social experimentation, especially in the digital cultures of young people. Numerous researchers point to the key role of online social networks for providing unique conditions to explore, articulate, and discuss new gender and sexual identities (e.g., Byron, Robards, Hanckel, Vivienne, & Churchill, 2019; Cover, 2018; Haimson, Dame-Griff, Capello, & Richter, 2019; Oakley, 2016, 2018; Vivienne, 2017). Large social media platforms have followed suit and incorporated new gender labels into their interfaces, starting with Google+, which added a third gender option, “other,” to their sign-up page in 2011, and followed by Facebook and OKCupid, which both provided a long list of gender options in their profile interfaces in 2014 (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Cover, 2018).

Academic discussions on this topic are often structured around the question of subversion versus hegemony. Some authors point out that digital gender and sexual diversity subverts the dominant binaries (e.g., Ekins & King, 2010; Haimson et al., 2019; Vivienne, 2017), whereas others argue either that the change is not radical enough (e.g., Oakley, 2016; Schudson & van Anders, 2019) or that there is no fundamental change at all, as the proliferation of gender and sexual labels reestablishes existing hegemonies, especially the idea of coherent, authentic, and essentialized gender and sexual identities (Cover, 2018).

In this article, I challenge the dichotomy of subversion versus hegemony because it does not reflect how my participants practiced gender diversity in their everyday lives. I draw on a larger project with queer migrants, Polish LGBTQs in the UK, which includes 767 online survey responses and 30 in-depth, face-to-face interviews (Szulc, 2019). For the purpose of this article, I analyzed six interviews with participants who identified outside the dominant gender binary (all other interviewees identified within the binary). My focus on queer migrants helps to bring out the issue of context, particularly cultural and linguistic specificity, which is largely absent from the current literature on digital gender diversity. To make sense of my participants’ everyday gender practices beyond the subversion versus hegemony dichotomy, I employ the concept of disidentification, introduced by José Esteban Muñoz (1999), who argues that it is impossible to fully break free of the dominant ideology. As I explain in more detail later in this article, Muñoz (1999) proposes disidentification as “a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (p. 11).

First, I review existing works on the role of digital media for the proliferation of new gender and sexual labels, pointing to the key theme of subversion versus hegemony in that work. Second, I revisit the concept of disidentification, exploring its relevance for digital gender diversity. I then describe my methods and participants, before presenting research results. I propose a disidentification model, demonstrating and systematizing a wide spectrum of gender disidentifications, and discuss in-depth three case studies, showing how my participants practiced gender disidentifications in their everyday lives. Finally, I relate my research results to the existing literature and highlight the key contributions of this article, which include updating the concept of disidentification to include increasingly digital societies and new gender practices, challenging

the dichotomous thinking about digital gender diversity, and stressing the importance of cultural and media contexts for understanding how new gender labels are being practiced in everyday life.

Digital Gender Diversity

Gender diversity is nothing new, and its existence has been well documented across cultures and historical periods (e.g., Herdt, 1994; Oyewùmí, 1997). Lugones (2007) reminds us that binary thinking around gender is linked to the mechanisms of “heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classifications,” which she calls “the colonial/modern gender system” (p. 187) that was imposed on many cultures by colonial powers. Focusing on the West and conceptualizing gender as a story, Ekins and King (2010) ask what kind of gender stories have been dominating the West since the late 19th century, and who has been telling them. They point to the crucial role of the rise of sexology in creating some popular gender labels beyond the binary of man and woman. For example, Magnus Hirschfeld distinguished the “transvestite” from the “homosexual” in 1910, and Harry Benjamin distinguished the “transsexual” from the “transvestite” in 1966 (Ekins & King, 2010, p. 27). They also recognize the early 1990s as the moment of a paradigm shift of conceptualizing gender in the West, with the rise of queer theory and activism that view gender beyond binary. This moment coincided with the popularization of the Internet and some early academic works on digital cultures argued for the potential of the Internet to realize a postmodern vision of gender fluidity (e.g., Turkle, 1995).

Ekins and King (2010) continue by analyzing two examples of nonnormative gender identities that have emerged or were promoted through homepages and blogs in the first decade of the 21st century: “autogynephilic transsexuals” (men who get aroused at the idea of having a female body) and “sissy boys” (demasculinized and femininized men). The authors point to the crucial technological and cultural change toward greater popularity of user-generated content, which allowed the new gender labels to be created and promoted by “ordinary” people rather than experts (such as sexologists, academics, and activists). Ekins and King (2010) additionally note that the possibility of relatively anonymous communication online helps people to tell “unwelcome” gender stories—that is, stories that may be considered too radical for the dominant ideology. Other authors who analyze more recent digital media developments emphasize the role of online networks for authentication and validation of alternative gender identities. Social media provide examples of “real” people embracing such identities—compared with fictional characters in books, movies, or TV series (e.g., Cavalcante, 2018; Gray, 2009b)—and afford the establishment of support networks, where people may articulate and discuss their alternative identities in a fairly safe environment (e.g., Byron et al., 2019; Oakley, 2018).

The contemporary landscape of digital media is vast and diverse, offering a wide range of information sources and socializing possibilities for those who want to explore and express gender diversity, including relevant Facebook fanpages, YouTube channels, Instagram hashtags, WhatsApp groups, Tumblr blogs, and TikTok videos (Jenzen, 2017; Robards, Churchill, Vivienne, Hanckel, & Byron, 2019). Recognizing the importance of digital media affordances—that is, what platforms afford its users to do—researchers point to the great popularity of Tumblr among gender-diverse and sexually diverse youth. Vivienne (2017) understands Tumblr as “a queer affective public,” because its architecture (e.g., customized design) and governance (e.g., acceptance of pseudonymity) afford considerable complexity and freedom in self-

presentation (p. 133). Similarly, Oakley (2016) argues that Tumblr allows “layered identities” because “identity construction on Tumblr occurs through a combination of bios, ‘About Me’ pages, blog posts, and tags on those posts” (p. 2), instead of being centered around user profiles. Haimson and associates (2019), in turn, call Tumblr “a trans technology” (p. 1), pointing out that, until recently, the platform afforded not only queer ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity but also trans realness, as it has provided a relatively safe space for expressing and validating newly adopted gender identities. Researchers agree that since Tumblr introduced a ban on so-called adult content in December 2018, it has become a less LGBTQ-friendly platform (e.g., Haimson et al., 2019).

In discussions about digital gender diversity, many authors point out that the emerging proliferation of gender labels on online social networks subvert the dominant gender binary, even though the subversion is rarely considered as total, complete, or radical enough. Oakley (2016) agrees that online gender and sexually diverse communities disturb hegemonic notions of “the female/male, feminine/masculine gender binary as well as hegemonic conceptions of heterosexual as the ‘default’ sexuality” (pp. 1–2) arguing at the same time that gender-diverse labeling remains within the dominant ideology where, for example, dominant genders do not need to be named and traditional pronouns are reused (e.g., use of singular they/them/their instead of ey/em/eir). Schudson and van Anders (2019) additionally point to the practice of policing new gender labels when conflicts arise around their “correct” definitions and new norms are established to regulate them. Cover (2018) provides the harshest critique of the new gender and sexual labels, accusing them of “micro-minoritization”—that is, producing ever more nuanced labels, which nonetheless do not challenge the notion of coherent identities in general and essentialized gender or sexual identities in particular (p. 298). Focusing more on sexual rather than gender diversity, Cover (2018) proposes that a more radical change “must rely on a postcategorizational framing of sexuality through a concept of ‘fluidity,’ and must eschew any labels whatsoever (p. 298). This critique relies on the binary of “micro-minority descriptors” versus “post-identitarian fluidity” (Cover, 2018, p. 296), which may be challenged with the concept of disidentification, which I discuss next.

Disidentifications

Muñoz (1999) proposes “three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices”: (1) identification, when a subject assimilates within or conforms to the dominant ideology; (2) counteridentification, when a subject resists and attempts to reject the dominant ideology; and (3) disidentification, when a subject “neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (p. 11). Though some scholars arguably misappropriate the concept of disidentification to discuss how majoritarian subjects “disidentify” with minoritarian positions (for analysis, see Thapar-Björkert & Tlostanova, 2018), disidentification is primarily a practice of minoritarian subjects who find it difficult to identify with the dominant ideology because it has not been created by or for them, or even with them in mind. As Muñoz (1999) points out, “the fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects” (p. 5). The author mainly focuses on queer-of-color artists and activists in the U.S. who do not simply reject the dominant ideology but instead recycle and remake it “as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 4). Focus on queers of color helps to nuance what exactly minoritarian subjects disidentify with; in this case, queers of color

may disidentify with the dominant heteronormative and/or racist ideologies, or heteronormativity of some dominant non-White communities, or racism of some dominant gay communities.

While Muñoz (1999) does not offer any systematic categorization of disidentifications, he hints that they include diverse practices. On the one hand, Muñoz (1999) conceptualizes disidentification as a survival strategy that “the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (p. 4). One example Muñoz (1999) offers is that of a young lesbian who disidentifies with lesbians in a TV show when watching it with her mother. She is being attracted to the lesbians in the show, but hides the attraction from her mother as a strategy to survive in a heteronormative context. In this sense, we can talk about the burden of disidentification since, as Eguchi and Asante (2016) point out, minoritarian subjects are often “forced to disidentify with shifting power relations to navigate the majoritarian codes of map” (p. 184). On the other hand, to disidentify may also mean to engage with the dominant ideology “in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31). Here, disidentifications primarily work to subvert the dominant ideology from within. They could, for example, take a form of a parody of damaging gender, sexual, or racial stereotypes. When discussing my research findings later in this article, I suggest a much wider spectrum of disidentificatory practices.

Muñoz (1999) admits that “disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects” (p. 5, emphasis in original), as some contexts and times may require more direct counteridentifications. It is disidentification, however, that the author sees as showing the greatest potential for empowerment, resistance, and survival of minoritarian subjects in majoritarian cultures. This stands in opposition to many discussions of digital gender diversity, reviewed previously, in which authors assert that the recently proliferating gender and sexual labels remain “regimentary, regulatory, and normativizing” (Cover, 2018, p. 298) or “are not radical enough to elicit true change in societal imaginings of gender and sexual orientation” (Oakley, 2016, p. 11). Some ethnographic research in media and communication studies challenges such arguments by pointing to complexities, at times contradictions, of everyday identity practices. Gray (2009a) describes a case of a young man in a small town in the U.S. who pragmatically declares himself “gay” without fully identifying with this label because it allows him to find other men for romantic and sexual relationships. In a more recent study into uses of Tumblr by trans and nonbinary people, Haimson and colleagues (2019) show how digital cultures may combine anti-essentializing ideals of ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity with the practices of identity realness. Although these authors do not employ the concept of disidentification, they share the same dedication to the in-betweenness of identity, identity that feels both/and or neither/nor, “identity-in-difference” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 7).

In this article, I update the concept of disidentification to include the contemporary context of increasingly digital societies and new gender practices. First, when Muñoz (1999) was developing the concept, digital media were just becoming popular among general populations in the West. The omnipresence of digital media in many contemporary societies means that disidentifications can now more easily be linked to the everyday practices of “ordinary” people, beyond the confines of artists, activists, or academics (Muñoz, 1999; Thapar-Björkert & Tlostanova, 2018). Second, while Muñoz (1999) is far from fixating identities, disidentifications nevertheless tend to describe hybridities of relatively well-established subject positions such

as gay/lesbian/queer and Asian/Black/Latinx. The proliferation of new gender labels, the meaning of which is still much negotiated, provokes new questions of what people actually disidentify with and how they do it.

Methods and Participants

This article builds on a larger project focusing on identities, migration experiences, and social media uses of Polish LGBTQs in the UK (Szulc, 2019). The project consists of 767 online survey responses and 30 in-depth face-to-face interviews, and was conducted between 2017 and 2019. The survey was promoted through multiple online channels, including social media of LGBTQ and migrant organizations, private messages on a popular Polish LGBTQ portal, and targeted advertising on Facebook and Instagram. To participate in the survey respondents needed to (1) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or a person of nonnormative gender or sexuality, (2) have Polish citizenship at the time of research or in the past, and (3) live in the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland).

Interviewees were chosen from 334 survey respondents who had indicated their willingness to participate in face-to-face interviews. Survey and interview participants were relatively diverse in terms of gender and sexual identity, as well as age, class, and place of residence (Szulc, 2019). All interviewees were White, which reflects the racial demographics of the overwhelmingly White Polish society (Balogun, 2020). The interviews lasted two hours each on average and were conducted face-to-face by the author in places chosen by the participants, usually at their homes or in cafés. They were conducted in Polish, or Ponglish; however, some interviewees switched between Polish and English, particularly when talking about their nonnormative genders and sexualities. During the interviews, we looked through and talked about some social media profiles and posts of the participants, if they gave permission. No data from the profiles were collected. The interviewees received £45 each as compensation for their time and expenses to participate in the interview.

In this article, I offer an in-depth analysis of interviews with all participants who identified outside the dominant gender binary—in total, six interviewees. Some participants were quite invested in particular gender labels at the time of research; others preferred to use multiple labels, or different labels at different times and in different situations, including “agender,” “nonbinary,” “queer,” “queer gay,” “femme/queer femme,” and “girlfag.” Some of them also embraced nonnormative sexual identities, which may or may not be related to their gender identities. I focus primarily on gender identities, but I may touch on sexual identities when it is relevant to my discussion. Five of the six interviewees were in their 20s and one in their early 30s at the time of interview. Two of them lived in London, one in Manchester, one in Birmingham, one in Nottingham, and one in a small town in Scotland. All of them started or finished undergraduate studies, some dropped out, and one interviewee completed their master’s degree. They moved to the UK between 2007 and 2017. Balancing several issues regarding naming research participants (including anonymity, relatability, and gendered names), I assigned each interviewee a random star name (e.g., Vega, Bellatrix, and Pollux). I use the pronouns they preferred at the time of interview, except for one participant, who recently informed me about changing her pronouns from they/them or he/him to she/her.

I analyzed the six interviews by coding for themes related to the participants’ reflections on their gender identities. At the time of analysis, I did not use any theoretical framework as guidelines for coding.

Exploring the results, I was struck by the prevalence of instances in which the participants were ambiguous about their gender identities, expressing a kind of “this is me, but” identities. Such a bottom-up data analysis approach directed me to the concept of disidentification.

In what follows, I present my research results adopting media-decentered and minoritizing/universalizing approaches. The former means that I do not limit my analysis to only those gender disidentifications that are practiced with the use of digital media. Eschewing the false division between the online and the off-line, I discuss my participants’ gender practices in their everyday lives, in and outside digital media, and provide their “deep contextualization” (Gray, 2009b, p. 16). At the same time, I call the practices “digital” gender disidentifications to emphasize the role of digital media as key sites for the emergence and practice of these gender disidentifications (Cover, 2018). The minoritizing/universalizing approach (Cvetkovich, 2003), in turn, provides protection from falling into the trap of minoritization on the one hand (i.e., overemphasizing minorities’ differences from the majority) and universalization on the other hand (i.e., overemphasizing minorities’ similarities with the majority). The minoritizing/universalizing approach oscillates between those two extremes, acknowledging the specificities of minoritarian experiences, while recognizing minorities’ embeddedness in bigger collectives and society at large.

Digital Gender Disidentifications

In presenting my research findings, I first introduce a disidentification model (see Figure 1) and then offer an in-depth discussion of digital gender disidentifications as practiced by my participants in their everyday lives. While my analysis included all six interviews mentioned in the previous section, I elaborate only on three cases, on a one-by-one basis, because I privilege detailed analysis and deep contextualization over quantity of examples. This allows me to engage in the specificities of how different forms of disidentifications are practiced in everyday life. I chose the three cases so that, taken together, they illustrate all the gender disidentificatory practices which came up in my analysis.

The disidentification model is intended to do two things. First, it illustrates the diversity of disidentificatory practices. While Muñoz (1999) hints that there are different kinds of disidentifications, their diversity is not explored in his work. Second, the model systematizes disidentificatory practices by categorizing them into larger groups, which helps to differentiate among different forms of disidentifications, how they are practiced, and by whom. At the same time, the model is not intended to be comprehensive. It is based on the six already mentioned interviews, and other data could point to other forms of disidentifications, which is in line with my argument about diversity of disidentificatory practices. Different forms of disidentifications are also not mutually exclusive; when practiced in everyday life, they intersect in a myriad of ways, as will become clear in the discussion of the three case studies.

The model begins with counteridentifications rather than identifications because I start from the perspective of minoritarian subjects, who often recognize their counteridentifications before they create their identifications (e.g., Cavalcante, 2018). For many LGBTQs, counteridentifications are moments of recognition “this is not me,” sometimes without a clear idea of who one is. Moments of identifications, “this is me,” often come after counteridentifications, and media prove to play an important role in these moments. For example, a trans woman in the U.S. in Cavalcante’s (2018) research recalled her first encounter with a

transgender representation in popular media by explaining, "I was just flabbergasted. I was like, this is me" (p. 1), and participants in research discussed by Szulc and Dhoest (2013), LGBs in Flanders, reported using social media for exploring their sexual identities more often before and during coming out than after it.

Nevertheless, in this article I challenge the idea of straightforward practices of counteridentifications and identifications, as my findings point to the prevalence of more ambiguous identity practices—disidentifications—in relation to gender diversity. I divide them into three main categories: strategic, contextual, and doubtful disidentifications. Strategic disidentifications include the practices of disidentifying instrumentally to protect oneself against (micro)aggressions and/or education burden (protective disidentifications), to remain intelligible or vague (simplified disidentifications), or to gain access to services (forced disidentifications). Contextual disidentifications point to the practices of disidentifying differently in different contexts, including cultural and linguistic contexts (cultural disidentifications), media contexts (mediated disidentifications), and different aspects of embodied identities—for example, gender identity as feeling, behavior, or the way one speaks (bodily disidentifications). Doubtful disidentifications describe the practices of questioning identifications, including questioning the finality or totality of one's identification (incomplete disidentifications), one's right to an identification (deficient disidentifications), and one's willingness to an identification (unwanted disidentifications). Figure 1 summarizes this categorization and gives examples for each disidentificatory practice; all examples come from my interviews. In the rest of this section, I discuss how gender disidentifications are practiced in everyday life.

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| COUNTERIDENTIFICATIONS | | |
| "this is not me" resisting or attempting to reject the dominant ideology e.g., counteridentifying with the dominant masculinity | | |
| IDENTIFICATIONS | | |
| "this is me" assimilating within or conforming to the dominant ideology e.g., identifying with the dominant masculinity | | |
| DISIDENTIFICATIONS | | |
| "this is me, but" neither assimilating within nor strictly opposing the dominant ideology | | |
| STRATEGIC DISIDENTIFICATIONS | CONTEXTUAL DISIDENTIFICATIONS | DOUBTFUL DISIDENTIFICATIONS |
| "me and not me" disidentifying instrumentally for different reasons | "my many me's" disidentifying differently in different contexts | "is this really me?" disidentifying as a result of questioning identifications |
| protective disidentifications disidentifying to protect oneself against (micro)aggressions and/or education burden (e.g., disidentifying as a "man" on Instagram to avoid sexual remarks or because of being tired of explaining what "nonbinary" means) | cultural disidentifications disidentifying differently in different cultural and linguistic contexts (e.g., using the pronouns "they/them" in English but "he/him" in Polish when feeling that singular "they" sounds unnatural in Polish) | incomplete disidentifications questioning the finality or totality of one's identification; "not yet" and "not all" disidentifications (e.g., recognizing that one's gender identity has recently changed and is still in flux, or only partially identifying with a particular gender) |
| simplified disidentifications dumbing down one's identifications to remain intelligible or vague (e.g., disidentifying as a "lesbian woman" instead of "nonbinary" to avoid questions) | mediated disidentifications disidentifying differently in different media contexts or in different ways on one social media platform (e.g., posting one's pictures with a trans flag on Tumblr but not on Facebook to avoid coming out as trans to some family members) | deficient disidentifications questioning one's right to an identification; "not enough" disidentifications (e.g., being uncertain if one can identify as "nonbinary" while not looking or dressing androgynously) |
| forced disidentifications disidentifying to gain access to services (e.g., disidentifying as a "man" on a social media's sign-up page which provides only binary gender options) | bodily disidentifications disidentifying differently in relation to different aspects of embodied identities (e.g., disidentifying as "gay" in terms of sexuality and "queer" regarding how one dresses and behaves) | unwanted disidentifications questioning one's willingness to an identification because of its negative connotations or exclusionary tendencies (e.g., disidentifying as "queer" because of its middle-class connotations) |

Figure 1. Disidentification model.

Vega

Vega moved to a small town in Scotland in the mid-2010s because her parents decided to go there. At that time, she was in her late teens and about to start at a university in Poland. She changed her plans to support her parents, as she was the only member of the family who spoke fluent English. When prompted at the beginning of the interview to describe who she is, she replied after a moment's thought: "*European, femme, queer*" (the italics in quotes indicate my participants' use of English, whereas regular font in quotes

indicate my translations from Polish into English). During the interview, she identified as an “*androgynous male*” or “*femme/queer femme*” with a preference for the pronouns they/them or he/him, but later she informed me that she changed her pronouns to she/her. Vega strongly counteridentified with being masculine and straight, as she explained: “*I’m queer, I’m not masculine, in a sense that, you know, wearing T-shirts and so on. . . . No! I’m gonna wear a fucking poncho. Fuck it!*” and “*I’m not straight, I’m far from straight. I’m even grateful for that, actually.*” When she was a kid, Vega often used digital media to explore her femininity and queerness:

Whenever I felt like I’m alone, I’m isolated because of my queerness, there was the Internet, there were lots of people like that in America, and they were out, and they were fab, and they taught me how to be myself.

When I asked Vega how she identifies in terms of gender, she replied: “*So, I identify as femme/queer femme in the idea that I embrace femininity and a kind of androgyny, largely, but more on the feminine side.*” This answer points to Vega’s complex gender disidentifications. She started by describing her gender as “*femme slash queer femme,*” suggesting that either of those two terms would work for her or, possibly, that none of them would be enough on its own. Vega continued by qualifying her femme identity as not purely feminine. She did not completely reject the idea of femininity, as if she counteridentified with it, nor did she fully adopt it, as if she simply identified as female, feminine, or femme. She embraced it with a difference: as a prevailing component of her androgyny. In this sense, Vega enacted incomplete disidentifications, which does not mean that her gender identity was lacking anything, but rather indicates that none of the words she used described her gender in its entirety.

I asked Vega about her gender identity in Polish, and before she gave me her answer, she explained in English, “*So, this is gonna be purely in English, not even gonna try in Polish.*” I wondered if it felt impossible for Vega to talk about her gender identity in Polish. She denied and explained that using English is a “*comfort zone*” for her to speak about her gender and sexuality because she learnt most of what she knew about them from English-language sources. Yet she added,

There is also another thing: To use them [words for gender and sexual diversity] in Polish is to engage with the ideas of Polishness. And to engage with the ideas of Polishness . . . is to pretty much think about what is to be a Pole. And to be a Pole, is not to be a queer. And that is something that I have experienced myself, on my own skin, through all the abuse that I have gone through. . . . So, to me it’s kind of like whenever I say . . . even when I say the word gay in Polish, that doesn’t sound right to me. That sounds to me as I’m engaging in a sort of, like, hate politics.

At the time of the interview, Vega also told me that she usually uses the pronouns they/them or he/him in English, but only he/him in Polish, as singular they/them felt unnatural in her native language. These examples illustrate Vega’s engagements with cultural disidentifications, showing her practices of disidentifying differently in different linguistic contexts, which bring with them different cultural baggage.

Vega also disidentified differently in different media contexts. In the Facebook's profile interface, she chose the category "androgynous male" and the pronoun "he/him." At the time of interview, Facebook already allowed gender-diverse identifications, although the sign-up page included only two genders, female and male (Bivens, 2017). Reflecting on the latter, Vega admitted that she would not have a big problem of choosing the option "male" on the sign-up page (at that time) because "officially, I'm *male* on record," which shows how she differentiated between her informal and formal gender disidentifications. However, she criticized the very necessity of indicating one's gender when creating a profile on Facebook (forced disidentifications) as well as its superficially broad approach to predefined genders:

They want to be *inclusive*, but their *inclusivity* is in fact *established* by them. *It is not inclusivity that kind of gives people opportunity to say who exactly they are as they wish they are. It is an inclusivity established by a corporation. So, weirdly, there are 70 genders [predefined by Facebook], that's it. You have no right to say anything else about it. [Facebook later added a "custom" gender field; Bivens, 2017].*

Vega also discussed her use of a popular Polish "gay dating" site, Fellow.pl, in the past. She noted that "here, it is really implicit, you know, *you're a man, you're here, you've got a dick.*" These examples indicate that mediated forced disidentifications may come from both a platform's design (Facebook) and its targeting practices and cultures of use (Fellow.pl).

Vega's favorite social media platform was Instagram, which, at the time of the interview, provided an optional gender field in the profile interface with four predefined options: "male," "female," "custom," and "prefer not to say." Vega explained that she is unapologetic and outspoken about her gender diversity on Instagram; for example, she was using the word "femme" in her bio and was posting gender-diverse selfies. Still, she decided to disidentify as "male" in the Instagram's optional gender field to protect herself against annoying comments and verbal abuse (protective disidentifications):

Instagram still has a problem with *sexualization*. If you leave the gender option *not specified*, there is an immensity of men who keep bothering you: "Do you have a penis or vagina?"; "I'd fuck you"; "You're such a beautiful woman." So, I put *male* there to scare them off. It works!

Vega navigated her multiple gender disidentifications by refusing to provide one label to comprehensively describe her gender and by carefully choosing her disidentifications in different cultural and media contexts, while considering the social realities of those contexts and ensuring her well-being.

Bellatrix

At the time of our interview, Bellatrix was in her/their early 30s and moved to London a couple of years before. Originally, she/they came for just a three-day workshop but decided to stay, missing the flight back to Poland. In her/their early 20s, Bellatrix thought, "I'm a gay man trapped in a female body." She/they added, "After some years, I was looking up different *trans* identities. I was reading everything! When I found *girlfag* on Wikipedia, it was a revelation for me! That . . . this is me!" Bellatrix's moment of

identification as a girlfag was preceded with many counteridentifications with the dominant femininity, moments of feeling "inadequate, too loud, and all that." She/they did not identify as a girlfag anymore at the time of interview, explaining that she/they was "now starting to explore femininity and masculinity at the same time a bit." While Bellatrix admitted enjoying this long process of gender and sexual exploration, she/they also pointed to the moments when she/they would prefer to have clearer ideas about her/their gender identity:

Sometimes, it's simply tiring. For example, when something is *all female*, I'm not sure I'm allowed to be there, I'm not sure if I'm *female*. And when something is, you know, for *gender nonconforming trans*, I'm not sure I'm *trans*. It's all exhausting. I started to test some other forms a bit, like *drag king*. So, this is interesting to me, but . . . I've been in the gender laboratory all the time for the last 10 years, for fuck sake!

This statement confirms Muñoz's (1999) assertion that "the fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects" (p. 5) and points to the burden of disidentification that falls on minoritarian subjects.

For Bellatrix, gender identity was strongly tied to sexual identity, which also made her/them doubtful about her/their belonging to the queer, or more broadly LGBTQ, community (doubtful disidentifications). Bellatrix questioned her/their right to identify as queer (deficient disidentifications). Acknowledging her/their gender and sexual diversity, Bellatrix nevertheless admitted that "for the last 10 years, I've been mainly dating men, so you know, deeds not words, right? Maybe it says something about me. . . . I'm wondering if I'm a hetero who impersonates a *queer*." She/they expressed the need for an external validation of her/their queerness: "I'd like to be able to know [who I am]. I mean, I have a very specific need here. Ideally, I'd like to get validation that I'm OK to be in the LGBTQ community. That would reassure me." At the same time, Bellatrix questioned her/their full willingness to identify as queer (unwanted disidentifications), explaining,

I have a gay friend who all the time talks shit about queers on Facebook. He says that "*queers are taking over my community*." For him, *queer* is an *insult*, and that's it. He says, "*You're all middle-class babies who are trying to piss off daddy*." And this is, you know, *uncomfortably close to where I may be*. I'm perhaps more *working class* than *middle class*.

Bellatrix articulated a range of doubtful disidentifications with her/their gender and sexuality, expressing feelings of being in transition and not queer enough, as well as questioning what queer actually stands for and if it may stand for her/them.

Like Vega and many other LGBTQs (e.g., Cavalcante, 2018; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013), Bellatrix primarily explored her/their gender and sexuality online and in English, through "gay porn" fanfiction as well as alternative pornography on Tumblr and Twitter. This provoked her/their cultural disidentification with the category of nonbinary:

It's difficult to talk about identity in Polish because I don't live in this language. So, while in English I get comfortable with the category *nonbinary*, I have no idea how to translate it into Polish. It feels like I have an invented identity in English, which isn't the first language for me.

At the same time, Bellatrix felt like gender nonbinary identities could not be easily grasped by some of her/their Polish Facebook friends, which provoked simplified disidentifications. While Bellatrix normally posted things on Facebook in English, she/they once shared an article in Polish, in which the author challenged what it means to be a "real" man and a "real" woman. Bellatrix explained: "I didn't want to write about all in-between identities. I just wanted to explain the basics. Because I simplify it a bit for Polish audience. You can't explain nonbinary identities if one still believes in 'real' men and 'real' women." Bellatrix explained similar problems with coming out in Polish to her/their family, suggesting it would be easier to come out if she/they was a lesbian and had a girlfriend: "I would just take her home and to all the family weddings. . . . But because the situation is more complicated, try to explain it to them! I don't feel like doing it and I don't have words for it." These examples show how Bellatrix navigated her/their gender and sexual diversity at the unique intersection of mediated, cultural, and simplified disidentifications.

While on Facebook Bellatrix tended to simplify her/their gender identity, she/they also commented on the practices of being gendered by the platform (forced disidentifications). During our interview, we checked some of the ads Bellatrix was seeing on Facebook, and we clicked on Facebook's explanations "Why am I seeing this ad?" Bellatrix expressed her/their irritation with the prominence of gender stereotypes in targeted advertising. The first ad we clicked on was an ad for a charity, and Facebook explained that the charity "wants to reach women aged 18 to 55 who live or have recently been near London, England." Bellatrix commented,

This is interesting because it's a charity where people go for a run to visit elder people. So, they go for a run, keep elder people company, and come back. It's interesting that they target only women. Maybe men don't want to help the elderly. I don't know what this is about.

Most other ads were also gendered to the extent that when we came across an ad where gender was not mentioned, Bellatrix exclaimed, "The first one that is not *gendered!*" This example shows how profit- and data-driven social media platforms may force some of their users into uncomfortable gender disidentifications, which are difficult to escape, at least at the level of the database (Bivens, 2017).

Pollux

Pollux grew up in a small town in Poland and moved to London in the mid-2010s, when they were in their mid-20s. They said they must have always known they were "gay," as they could not recall any moment of "self-discovery." Assigned male at birth, Pollux has been attracted to some aspects of dominant femininity: "I don't know why some things that are, say, stereotypically female, I sometimes like them. And I sometimes feel like they're part of me." They also said that "there are thousand elements of gender identity, including how you behave, how you dress, feel, and speak. And at one point I was wondering if I would answer 'man' to all of them. Surely, not to all of them." Pollux established their gender identity

through a series of disidentifications with femininity and masculinity, in relation to different aspects of their embodied identity (bodily disidentifications). Protecting their freedom to self-expression, Pollux did not conform to dominant gender norms during their teenage years; for example, they behaved in a feminine way, dyed their hair blue, and painted their nails pink. This gender nonconformity, however, met with hateful reactions from some in their town: "It happened to me very often that I was simply walking on the street and other people not only laughed at me but also took out their phones, took pictures, and made videos." Pollux admitted that such reactions made their life miserable. It got better when they moved to a bigger city in Poland, but after spending some time in the city, they had to move back to their hometown.

During one of their Skype chats with Polish friends in the UK, Pollux was encouraged to join them in London: "They told me: 'Come and live here. It's good here. Here, if you're a *freak*, nobody is pointing a finger at you like they do in Poland. You will feel freer here.'" Pollux left the next day. While Pollux engaged with their gender diversity already in Poland, they recognized their migration to London as a turning point in this regard:

As for my gender identity, it's changed and it's been still changing now, recently, since I moved here. I don't think I would say to anybody that I'm a man anymore. I prefer the term *queer*, which is looser. I feel it more. . . . Though, I still think that I'm gay. . . . I feel like I'm somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Or, totally beyond it. I think it's just the beginning of my journey, which I would call *transitioning*, in a way. And this is the beginning which would never really happen, if I didn't move here.

In this quote, Pollux described their incomplete disidentifications, in the sense that their gender and sexual journey, as they called it, has not yet been completed, and maybe never will be completed. At the same time, their migration experience played a key role in heightening their feeling of transition, as changing location may allow a freedom of self-reinvention.

Even though Pollux admitted that they continued to identify as "gay," they also questioned their identification with the mainstream gay culture because of its beauty and gender norms (unwanted disidentifications). This form of disidentification had also a cultural aspect (cultural disidentifications), as Pollux attributed exclusionary tendencies particularly to the mainstream gay culture in Poland: "Polish homosexuals are as toxic as heterosexuals. It's always been a big problem for everyone in Poland that I am fat. And that I am bent." Pollux found support on Tumblr, where they spoke to people from around the world who were like them or who accepted them the way they were:

When I was a young gay man, I was really terrified. It's not that I felt that I was ugly. But I thought that everyone else was finding me ugly, that everyone was thinking that I'm some kind of an awful monster. And I felt a bit like a monster. At least until I discovered that there are other communities within the homosexual community, smaller communities, like *bears* [a community of usually larger and hairier gay men].

After moving to London, Pollux became active in a relatively vibrant gay bear culture in the city. At the same time, they kept avoiding Polish gay men, including Polish gay bear culture. When Pollux received

a Facebook invitation to attend an event for Polish bears in London, they replied, "Thank you for warning me so I can absolutely avoid it," explaining to me that they associated Polish gay bear culture with strict norms of being masculine and hairy.

Pollux's unwanted disidentifications intersected with their mediated disidentifications, as is best illustrated in their uses of hook-up apps. At the time of interview Pollux used several hook-up apps, including Grindr, which is one of the most popular hook-up apps in the world:

Most people use Grindr for a quick sex date, but it's not an option for me. It's because Grindr is an app for, what I call, mainstream gays, who are not interested in me because they think that I'm too fat for them or I don't take care of myself, which is totally untrue.

Pollux experienced a lot of verbal abuse on Grindr, receiving such messages as "Fuck off, fatty"; "What are you doing here, pig?"; or "You should go to the gym instead of being on Grindr." Nevertheless, Pollux continued using the app, as it was convenient for them for practical reasons, including finding a room to rent and buying marijuana. They also appreciated that Grindr allows its users to set a custom gender and pronouns, while complaining that "some people use this option to put heteronormative things there, like '*real man*' as their *pronoun*." Their hook-up app of choice was GROWLr, "the gay bear social network," where Pollux found friends for parties and sex. They also used BiggerCity (an app for "chubby gay men and their admirers"), Scruff (an app for somewhat more alternative men), and Recon (an app for "gay men interested in fetish and kink"). Not fully identifying with the target groups or user bases of some of those apps, Pollux disidentified differently on different platforms, navigating different aspects of their identity and employing different disidentificatory practices—for example, putting pictures exposing their belly on BiggerCity, but not on Grindr, and filtering out users on Scruff by choosing the option "I am into chub" in the app's search interface.

Conclusion

Participants in my research demonstrate a wide spectrum of complex and intersecting disidentificatory practices in relation to gender diversity. By categorizing these practices in a disidentification model and providing deeply contextualized case studies, I show the diversity of disidentificatory practices, which may be enacted differently by different subjects in different situations. For all my participants—a particular group of young queer migrants—cultural and mediated disidentifications played a pivotal role in navigating their gender identities among different cultural, linguistic, and media contexts. At the same time, each of them demonstrated a unique set of gender and sexual disidentifications. For Vega, who unapologetically embraced her femininity, it was important to enact protective disidentifications on Instagram to avoid sexist verbal abuse. Bellatrix questioned her/their right and willingness to identify in nonnormative ways, enacting several doubtful gender and sexual disidentifications, which she/they explored mainly in alternative digital media. Pollux, in turn, while embedded in gay culture, questioned its beauty and gender norms, embracing unwanted disidentifications to a different extent on different hook-up apps.

These diverse cases of gender disidentificatory practices point to the importance of multiple factors and their multiple intersections for how identity is practiced in everyday life, including strategic decision making in particular situations; cultural, linguistic, and media contexts; as well as the doubts that emerging

identity labels may raise when they take on particular meanings. The cases also illustrate how gender disidentifications intersect with other identity practices. While gender was the main focus of my analysis, it proved impossible to talk about it without acknowledging its intersections with, for example, national identities (Vega's difficulties of imaging queer Polishness), class identities (Bellatrix's identification with the working class and her/their association of the term queer with the middle class), and sexual, gender, and beauty norms (Pollux's disidentification with the mainstream gay culture because of its femme- and fatphobia). Race, which was the main focus in Muñoz's (1999) work, did not come to the fore in my interviews, which does not mean that it did not play an important role in my participants' gender disidentifications, but rather confirms that Whiteness tends to be taken for granted in Polish self-conception (Balogun, 2020) (Some of the interviewees, however, did critically reflect on race in other parts of the interviews).

My interviews also show that it is useful to update the concept of disidentification for times in which new nonnormative gender labels have proliferated and online social networks have started to play an indispensable role in the everyday lives of many in contemporary societies. First, my findings show how minoritarian subjects not only "encounter obstacles in enacting identifications" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 8) but also move between different identity labels, question them, and negotiate their meanings. Additionally, while disidentifications' main functions are "to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31), they also may feel disempowering, placing a burden of disidentification on minoritarian subjects, as it was demonstrated by Bellatrix, who expressed being tired of her/their long process of gender and sexual exploration. Second, in the digital media-saturated world, new gender disidentifications often originate in online social networks (Cover, 2018), and the networks have become inseparable from their everyday enactments. In all six interviews analyzed for this article, the participants pointed out that they first had learnt about nonnormative genders and sexualities on the Internet. All of them also had to navigate their gender disidentifications across different social media platforms with their different affordances, governance policies, and user bases. While recognizing the critical importance of digital media in the creation and proliferation of the new gender labels, I also advocate going beyond the digital in research on digital gender diversity. It is key to acknowledge the imbrications of the online and the off-line to study diverse gender practices in everyday life.

When we attend to everyday life practices of digital gender disidentifications, it becomes difficult to sustain the dichotomy of subversion versus hegemony. My findings question the arguments which suggest that the online proliferation of new gender and sexual labels is per definition "normativizing" and "not radical enough"; arguments that are often put forward in pieces based on a theoretical discussion (e.g., Cover, 2018) or analysis of a particular platform, usually Tumblr (e.g., Oakley, 2016). The new labels cannot be considered subversive or hegemonic on their own. It is more productive to investigate how these labels are in fact being used in everyday life and to provide the "deep contextualization" of the usage (Gray, 2009b, p. 16). People who adopt them both (strategically and contextually) conform to and struggle against the dominant gender ideology, and at times doubt their own gender identifications.

Therefore, new gender-diverse labels should not be considered simply more nuanced subcategories for gender identity, which are stable, coherent, and clearly defined. Nor should they be thought of as subversive in themselves. Their functions can only be understood "in situ" (Gray, 2009b, p. 126), which

highlights the importance of cultural and media contexts (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Szulc, 2014), especially in times when it has become relatively easy to research (often anonymous) social media data, scraped from a particular platform—for example, posts with gender-diverse hashtags on Tumblr. Such data undoubtedly have their advantages, while they also make it difficult to specify what in fact we are learning about whom (apart from presenting other analytical and ethical challenges; e.g., Leurs, 2017). As my participants attest, new gender labels may be used interchangeably, may be employed differently in different situations and contexts, and may take on different meanings for different people.

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