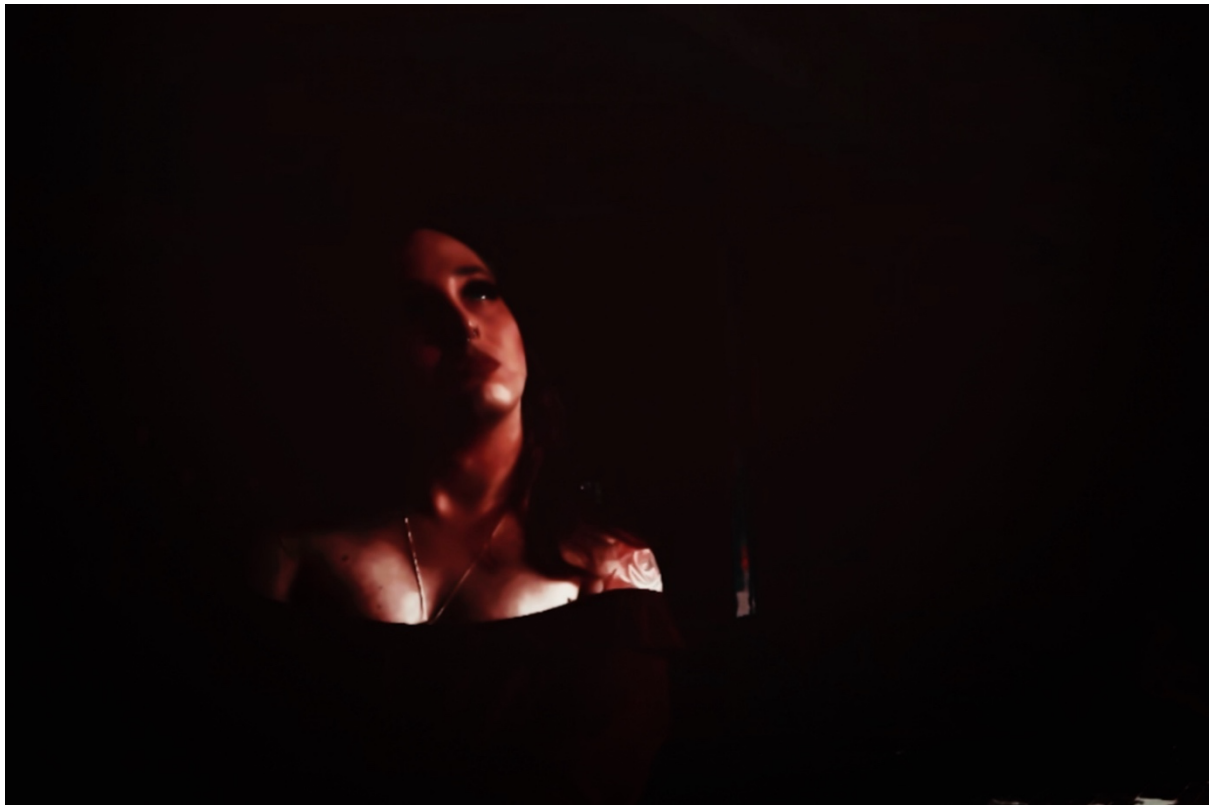


# The Fear of Queer: Change of Heart or Change of Mind

*Mapping the fear of queer people and the preconceptions that the outside world has towards people who don't feel the need to label themselves.*

Position Paper  
Interdisciplinary Arts Maastricht  
Sam Coenen  
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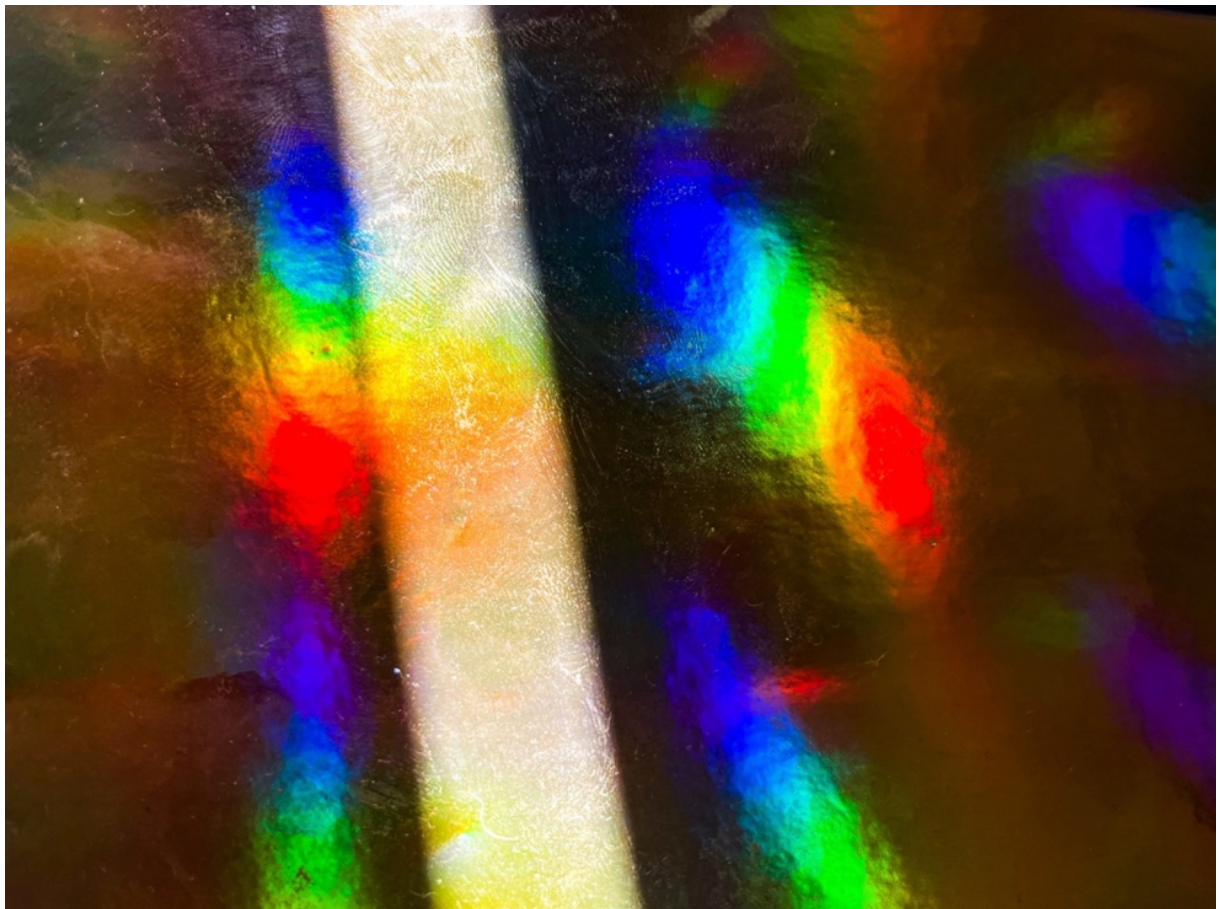
*Liège, Babs van Dijk, 2021*

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## Abstract

This research paper discusses the fear of the queer community living in the region between Cologne and Antwerp, including Limburg. It will look into the mental health of queer people and its possible relation with fear. By interviewing queer people and non-LGBTQIA+ people, I try to map the fear among people from the community, and the possible origin of the problems that they experience. The aim is to find out how deeply rooted fear is in queer people that grew from discrimination related experiences they have had in their lives. I have been working around the question whether a change of heart or change of mind is needed to gain acceptance for the LGBTQIA+ community to be accepted as a whole. This paper also stresses the importance of addressing ignorance that has a possible relation to polarization. I will share the experiences I have gained from conversations I had during my “Dating Experiment”. Last, this paper analyses queer art and the meaning of it. I chose a few artists that practice and/or perform queerness as part of their identity or artistic work.

*“If I wait for someone else to validate my existence, it will mean that I’m shortchanging myself.”<sup>1</sup>*



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<sup>1</sup> Zanele Muholi, 2021

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## Preface

*"I am proud, that I found the courage to deal the initial blow to the hydra of public contempt."*<sup>2</sup>

Our rapidly changing world is a direct result of the irresistible urge of constant developing ourselves as human beings. We've all been looking for a better quality of life, and we will always keep doing that. It's an instinct of survival, and a quest to find one's personal meaning of happiness. However, we also tend to think that we can decide for others what is right and what is wrong. Humans are very egocentric beings when it comes to self-gain, but we are also very concerned with all the people around us. For instance, I have been called "lucky" to be born in the Netherlands, because I only got bullied at high school and have parents who accept me for who I am. I don't feel lucky at all, it's an eerie feeling when someone tells me so. It bothers me that even today, no country can say that 100% of their population accepts gender identities or sexualities that differ from cis-gender or being straight. I can say this from personal experiences and situations that I face on a regular basis.

For anyone who is not connected to i-Arts, I will explain the term Position Paper: In the study of Interdisciplinary Arts, the term 'Position Paper' is used to describe a bachelors' thesis which will contain elaborate research about a topic, consisting of a theoretical and an artistic part. It is a way to position oneself in a topic and field and a stepping stone for the rest of the Graduation Project, following this paper. \*When I mention the "community", I mean the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> Baume, Matt. "The Amazing Story of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and the Birth of Queer Activism." *Hornet Stories*. 2017.

## I. Artist Statement

*“Traditional beliefs of sexuality, gender identity and mental health are being reconsidered from a critical perspective, which leads to a deep and complex polarization of society. Increasingly more profound and science-based knowledge about human diversity is available, which makes radical cultural and societal changes inevitable.”*

My creative process always starts very intuitively, whether it's songwriting, composing music or making digital artworks. It's interesting to see that when I got into iArts, I was mostly focusing my artistic practice on drag, photography and poetry. I wrote a hundred songs at the beginning of 2021. I now have a large collection of songs and sounds.

Through my artistic practice I want to explore and create my own world where people can step in and out. As a storyteller at heart, I want to give my stories and that of others a platform in the form of music and performance. The way I present myself within my artistic practice, is that shows both my masculine and feminine side.

I rediscovered my passion for painting two years ago. This started off with watercolor paintings, which later on evolved into photographing my paintings and create digital artworks. Due to this interesting new world, I discovered a lot of possibilities to translate my mind into art. I started to really become able to create my own world through visual art. I have tackled the topic of gender in the past during projects at iArts in different ways, using natural sounds, which I implanted into songs, and film. My film project ended up being an ode to all the human spectra there are in terms of color, sexuality, faith and gender.



As an artist, thinker and creator, I position myself critically by working on interdisciplinary projects to tackle societal issues. Song-writing and composing orchestral soundtracks for have become my strongest tool in translating my feelings, thought processes and criticism not only in words, but also in sound. I want to create a world and invite the people in it through mediums like audio-visual storytelling, performativity, digital art and poetic soundscapes. Writing and listening to music healed my own scars in many ways I could never have imagined to be possible. The combination of expressive songs, poetic soundscapes, & digital art shape the artistic language I am currently developing. The aim of my upcoming project is to trigger a change of heart, and it will hopefully serve as a tool for the LGBTQIA+ community to speak up even more about diversity and their gender identity. I want to reach people who recognise themselves in my art. I aim to create art that resonates and trigger possible confrontation.

*I believe that collective acceptance and respect are key to get as close as possible to one's authentic identity. Many people live in the gloomy reality of never being able to be accepted the way they are. Everyone who colours outside the lines of socially accepted views on how someone should look like and be like, faces either minor or major disrespectful and unacceptable behaviour from the world around them. The best realistic situation one can have is not even close to the luxury that white-cis-straight people can enjoy. A luxury that is forgotten, and taken for granted on an even large scale.*

## 2. Introduction

Expressing one's identity, in every possible way, is of great importance in our existence and development of every human being. Yet, being able to express one's true 'self' is being called a 'luxury', if you identify other than cis and straight in terms of gender and sexuality. The core of this project starts with my own position within the world we live in. As a queer person who has lived with fear as it comes to expressing my gender identity, I feel the need to investigate this level of fear in others as well.

This research paper is an attempt at finding out how both deeply fear is rooted in the systems of queer people and also the underlaying fear that comes from the outside world towards queer people. I am going to focus on the region between Cologne and Antwerp, including Limburg. Why this region? It's the region I grew up in and I believe that not enough has been done in this part of the world. I think it is important to raise more awareness for this relation between mental health issues and queerness. Am I looking for possible solutions? Maybe. I hope this is a first step into changing the status quo.

Mental health is a combination of our emotional, psychological and social well-being. We are all affected by the way we think, feel and act. Important factors that play a big role in the general mental health of an individual are brain and gene chemistry, life experiences such as trauma or abuse and family history of mental health problems. It helps us determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices. Maintaining a healthy mental state of mind is important in every stage of life, from childhood to adolescence through adult. It can be negatively impacted by the way one experiences childhood, poor work/life balance, not being accepted for who you are or things like a difficult marriage. Mental well-being, or 'emotional well-being', is the state of thriving in various stages and areas of life, such as in relationships, at work, play and more, despite the ups and downs in life. It is defined as having both and awareness of your emotions and the ability to manage and express those feelings in a healthy manner. Generally, the well-being is how one feels good about themselves and life.

For many people, sexuality and gender identity can be a fluid phenomenon. "Queer" is an overarching term for the people who feel like the current labels of the LGBTQIA+ community are too limitative. For example, if someone identifies as non-binary, but is sexually interested in everyone who identifies as female, there is no name or label for them. That's why over the years, 'queer' has become an act of rebellion or resistance. There is also a notion that there is a difference between performing queerness and identifying as queer. In this paper, I will be looking into this in more detail. I will investigate queer musicians and performances during this process. Music provides a tool to express emotions into sound, melodies or rhythm. One can translate emotions into music or sound to make the audience understand it and feel them by listening to it. It is a universal language through in which every unspoken word can be said. It can serve as a tool of translation to express one's feelings of anxiety, trauma or other types of emotions. I strongly believe that art and music opens can serve as a bridge between a polarized society where people stand right in front of each other. The main question I will be working with during the research of this paper is the following:

*How can the fear people from the LGBTQIA+ community and their experiences be mapped to build an interdisciplinary audiovisual performance aimed to address mental health issues and the acceptance of queerness in society?*

### 3. Research Methodologies

I will investigate the LGBTQIA+ community between the regions of Cologne and Brussels (including Limburg). I want to investigate the fear that queer people usually live with or have been living with for a longer time. I wish to get a better understanding of the community by meeting people from the community, such as queer artists, **interviewing** them to see how their mental state of mind is affected because of their sexuality or gender expression. I have made a start of creating a network during the summer by going to the pride events and made some connections already. I want to initiate a dialogue with queer people about their experiences. I believe that there is still a lot to be gained in our world. There is always work needed to gain more acceptance and awareness, though there is also a critical side on these matters and I also wanted to research that side. I want to create a combination of audiovisual soundscapes and hopefully a performance in the end. The method I am going to explore is “**research through making**”, via performance and songwriting. **Ethnographic research** is another tool I will use, by delving myself deeper in the LGBTQIA+ community and speak with people about their mental health after they came out of the closet. I will also be speaking with people that are not part of the community in my **dating experiment**. I will use art and music as a tool of translation in future projects, based on the research I am conducting for this research paper. I want to turn data into knowledge and turn that into an audiovisual performance.

In order to answer the research question, I will conduct theoretical and artistic research into queer musicology and the basics of mental health. In the upcoming weeks, I will be doing interviews with people from in and out of the community as part of my field research. I immersed myself into the queer community by attending various types of events that are taking place in the region between Cologne and Brussels, but also speaking to members from the community outside of these events. What would also be part of the field research, I was interested to investigate both sides of how people see and experience the LGBTQIA+ community. This means that I wanted to actively go in conversation with people, which I did, and there are a lot of interesting things that came out of that.

When I wrote my graduation strategy this year, I worked around the main question “how can the mediums of music and performance be used to tackle the topics of gender and mental health, and address socio-political connections between them?”. Looking back now, I was focussing more on the mediums themselves. By researching and writing this position paper, I have realized that the core my upcoming work is the theme itself: “The Fear of Queer”. The mediums I will choose in the future to translate my work into an artistic project are very much open. I want to map the issues that people of the community face and make it more visible for a larger audience in order to really raise awareness on this matter. There is so much ignorance because the Netherlands used to be one of the best accepting countries in the world, which is by far not true anymore nowadays.

## 4. Queerness & Society

The golden rule “treat other people the way you want to be treated yourself” seems easy to practice, however, reality is very different for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The famously known quoted line from Thomas Gray’s poem *Ode on a Distant Prospect at Eton College*, “Where ignorance is bliss, Tis folly to be wise”<sup>3</sup>, is interpreted in various ways. We hear it often in the shortened version “Ignorance is bliss” which could be misinterpreted to excuse yourself for being lazy with one’s mind and be happier. It wasn’t necessarily meant to being apathetic about knowledge. Though, it seems that the majority of the world we live in base their actions on the things they know.

### *Ignorance Is Not Bliss*

Ignorance is not bliss at all. It has led and still leads to making poor decisions and actions that have terrible consequences that can have a negative impact on the quality and even the quantity of life for many. In the many conversations I have had in my life with people that are not part of the LGBTQIA+ community, I have often heard the same type of answer when it comes to either sexuality or gender identity. It would start with them saying that any sexuality and gender identity that differs from being a “man” or “woman”, is completely unnatural. Basically, all transgender, non-binary or queer people are unnatural, is what often is stated. There is a general belief that gender should always be binary and that it is parallel to the sex of an individual. What is the meaning natural anyways? I would ask them the question whether they think that nature as whole, from plants to animals to humans, to everything natural and living on this planet, is completely “perfect without mistakes”. Then, I would again receive the general same answer “no of course not, nothing is perfect”. They were not able to answer me when I linked back to the beginning of the conversation where they said that trans people are not natural. We should be proud that we’re at a point where we are able to correct certain mistakes that were made by nature. To end the conversation, I would directly refer to this quotation by Christine Jorgensen (2020):

*“Nature made a mistake, which I have corrected.”<sup>4</sup>*

### *GENDER ≠ SEX*

There is also a general misconception that I have heard from a lot of people from either in or out of the LGBTQIA+ community, which doesn’t necessarily have something to do with not **wanting** to know, but simply something that also has been taught us the wrong way during biology classes in high school. Whenever people are referring to gender, they often link this to ‘what you’ve got downstairs’ and ‘what nature gave you’. What was never spoken about during biology classes, is the fact that the ‘sex’ is the type of genital that you were born with. And most important, what was never taught as well during biology, is that your gender and sex actually can be different. So, what I’m thinking now, is how could someone who has not per se something to do with transgenders, know how this works? I strongly believe that the educational system in the Netherlands fails over and over again in terms of inclusivity.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Gray, *Ode on a Distant Prospect at Eton College*

<sup>4</sup> Gender Wellness of Los Angeles, “Christine Jorgensen”, 2020

## 4.1 Mental Health & Queerness

Mental health is often ignored as a part of being healthy. But it is one of the most important components of our general health. It's a driving force of our daily life. Bad mental health impacts our day-to-day life a lot, like making it harder to get simple or complex things done. The LGBTQIA+ community face these challenges just like everyone else, though they may experience more intense hurdles in their daily life because of their gender identity and/or sexuality. It is crucial to be able to live as one identifies and be loved for that. When one has these experiences, less stress and increased self-esteem come from that. The findings of research done on this matter show that when we are able to accept our identity, one feels whole. It allows us to feel more confident about who we are.

Everyone has a sexual orientation and gender identity, but people who identify as part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+) community are at higher mental health risk compared to others. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)<sup>5</sup>, "LGB adults are more than twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience a mental health condition. Transgender individuals are nearly four times as likely as cisgender individuals to experience a mental health condition", (2022). Many factors aside, this is because many people identifying as LGBTQIA+ face discrimination, family rejection, harassment, and fear of violence.

People are afraid to walk alone at night. This seems to count for about 85% of the people I talked to, either in or out of the community. Part of this project has been to map various forms of fear. So, I asked **40 cis-men, 40 cis-women, 10 transmen, 10 transwomen and 15 queer people** about fear, mental health, "Pride" and the acceptance of the queer community. (In this case I used "queer" as the overarching term for people who identify as non-binary, gender non-conforming and everything that does not have a label or don't want to have a label) on a scale of 1 to 10, how safe they feel to walk on the streets at night. The average numbers are divided in the genders of the people I interviewed. This does *not* mean there are no other genders, but simply for this part of the research, I was not able to interview people of all genders. What was not surprising, but still very clear, is that cis-men feel most safe to walk on the streets. The other respondents all had at least once or more a negative experience that influences their choice to walk on the streets when it's dark even today.

Average numbers people gave regarding feeling safe to walk alone on the streets at night:

Cis-men 9.1

Cis-women 2.3

Queer people 4.4

Transmen 5.7

Transwomen 2.1

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<sup>5</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), "Identity and Cultural Dimensions", 2022

It'd be an over exaggeration to say that every member of the LGBTQIA+ community suffers from extreme mental health issues, though they are more prone to have issues around mental health or emotional well-being. But are there mental health issues that LGBTQIA+ population struggle more with than others? The simple answer to that question is: yes. Depression, PTSD and anxiety disorders are way more common for people among this community than for cis-straight people. Suicide rates from teenage transgender kids are higher than usual. Differences can also be seen between LGB young people and their heterosexual peers in the field of psychological problems. 40% of lesbian, gay or bisexual young people have emotional problems, compared to 18% of heterosexual young people. Also when it comes to behavioral problems (41% versus 27%) and hyperactivity (41% versus 27%) major differences were noted.

"Like with any identity, feeling different—or worse, unaccepted as you are—is a significant risk factor for mental health struggles," says Anna Docherty (2021), PhD, LP, assistant professor of psychiatry from Mental Health Institute at University of Utah Health. "The truth is, most of us experience some significant anxiety or depression in our lifetimes, and we often manage this with social support. Without adequate social support and acceptance, mental health is quite difficult to maintain. Increasing dialogue about LGBTQIA+ experiences and how individuals are overcoming struggles can help normalize and validate what individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ are managing. Importantly, this can also lead to better education, acceptance, social support, empowerment, and pride." It would affect one badly, to have your loved ones not accept or support you is one of the worst things I could imagine, luckily, I have a very supportive family but I do know people who constantly live in fear of being kicked out as a result of being outed. It creates depression, fear, anxiety, and much worse things. Among the people I interviewed, I asked about their experiences on how the mental health is affected by being part of the LGBTQIA+ community and express this publicly. Feeling scared

## 4.2. Minority Stress

There's this notion that being part of the LGBTQIA+ community is considered 'different'. We have been taught this and simply because the community is often called a "collection of minorities". This was also confirmed when I interviewed various people from outside the community for my field research. Without bad intentions, the majority of those consider people from the whole community as being 'different' or 'not normal'. What is 'normal' anyways? What if this notion causes (un)intentional damage?

According to Meyer (2003), Stress or tensions because you are 'different' is called 'minority stress'. negative reactions, and the fear of it, but also reduced self-acceptance and being 'in the closet' can cause this stress, which can have negative consequences for your health.<sup>7</sup> One of the results of my field research is that at least 66% of the queer people I interviewed suffered from mental health problems in the past or suffer from it nowadays. Half of these came from stress or tensions because of expressing their gender identity and/or sexuality in public, and having had violent actions from people or any form of discrimination. From the straight-

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<sup>6</sup> Anna Docherty, Healthcare University of Utah "Why Does The LGBTQIA+ Community Suffer from Poor Mental Health at Higher Rates?", 2021

<sup>7</sup> Meyer, 2003

cisgender people I interviewed, at least 39% told me they suffered from mental problems in the past, of which none of them actually experienced those because of their gender identity or sexuality. They would even ask me, why would I suffer from being straight and cisgender? Interesting answer. They see no reason in that, and that is exactly how simple this matter could be.

### 4.3 Pride

Pride provides a space where people from the community can connect with each other, but also with allies who identify as straight and cis-gender. It helps actively in reducing isolation and increases visibility of the ones who are underrepresented in society. Though, over time, this evolved from “Gay Pride” to “Pride”, since it doesn’t limit itself anymore to only gay people, but all types of gender, sex or race. Basically, just everyone who wants to celebrate diversity and inclusivity. It validates that we all belong to society and are loved. By celebrating this combination of both pain and the beauty of diversity, Pride Festivals contribute to a better mental state of mind. Embracing diversity is being inclusive of all people, ideas and viewpoints. It’s respecting others. It’s being open and curious. And it’s promoting fairness and opportunity for all.

There’s a critical side on pride events from different perspectives. Let’s start with people who are not part of the community. The majority of the people I interviewed, straight men in particular, refer to the representation of the Amsterdam Canal Parade, at least a glimpse of what they have seen. The disadvantage of large-scale representation, for example on the Dutch Public Broadcast Corporation, is that misconception can take place on a large scale. Since there is a broad representation of human diversity and inclusivity, you will see the Dutch policemen on boats singing, but the next boat can be full of men wearing pink thongs only. Apparently, the last one mentioned makes a memorable impression that plays a role in the misconception that all of the people from the LGBTQIA+ community have -as they call it- “extreme” interests. A lot of people who don’t have necessarily something to do with the community, also said at the beginning of the conversations I had with them that they don’t think that ‘Pride’ events are still needed. They had no idea that the Netherlands is still a place where people who identify other than straight or cis, still face a lot of discrimination and violence when it comes to their gender identity or sexual preference. According to ILGA Europe (2020), the Netherlands has dropped to number 11 on the Rainbow Index Map, where they reflect on the legal and policy human rights situations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people in Europe<sup>8</sup>. When I told this to them, that the Netherlands scores only 62% on respect of human right & full equality of all genders, they understood way better why Pride events are still needed. According to COC Nederland (2020), the Netherlands is again not in the top 10 for LGBTQIA+ rights<sup>9</sup>.

The answers I received from people that are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, were very different. What they all had in common: yes, the Pride events are definitely still needed. The combination of festivity and inclusion of everyone is an invitation to all human beings to truly enjoy and feel free altogether. There are mixed opinions on the form of the existence of the current Pride events. I heard various ideas on how to increase visibility and acceptance of the

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<sup>8</sup> ILGA Europe, “Rainbow Europe Index”, 2020

<sup>9</sup> COC Nederland “Nederland Valt Weer Uit top 10,” 2020

community. A few of the respondents that I interviewed, told me that they don't feel comfortable with all the largescale events such as Prides. They would definitely go to smaller events, but not necessary in a party type of setting. A desire for more local and smaller scaled events is clearly there among the people I interviewed. Lots of people from the community also stated that Pride should not be called a "festival type of setting", as it takes away the essence of what Pride stands for: a protest call for freedom of individuals.

I have visited three different Pride events throughout the summer: Antwerp Arts & Pride Festival, Christopher Street Day Cologne and Amsterdam Canal Pride. I can definitely highlight quite some differences between these Pride events. There were a few elements that I paid attention to during these events, such as the parades and how they were part of Pride, but also how safe I felt in terms of expressing myself (and others).

Let's start with my visit of the Antwerp Arts & Pride Event. Antwerp was more focused on a combination of art and pride. A combination of exhibitions and performances took place with a pride parade and festivity to close off. I noticed that there was definitely a much more festive vibe than I experienced during the Amsterdam and Cologne pride. There was an ongoing exhibition throughout the city of Antwerp where you could search for portrait photographs of people from the LGBTQIA+ community, but also their allies. The allies of the community, which are covered in the letter "A" of the LGBTQIA+ alphabet, next to people who identify as asexual, are often forgotten to be mentioned by society. The "Trails of Stories", as this walk was called, contained a combination of photos and stories at about fifteen places in the city. It is a colorful mix of some famous and lesser-known people from our community. There was a lot of visual art presented throughout the city as well which was very intriguing to see, because art can provide a bridge between non-LGBTQIA+ people and people from the community. The public visible art is definitely something I missed when I visited the Amsterdam Canal Pride and Christopher Street Day later on in the summer, as there was way less investment done in public art exhibitions during these Pride events. You had to pay quite some money to see the exhibitions, on which I think scares away a majority of the possible audience that could have been reached. I did not have the feeling at this event that I was able to walk in a dress for example without being looked weird at. I had the idea that you had to be part of a performance or the parade to be able to truly dress the way you want.

Christopher Street Day Cologne was a festive day where not only the LGBTQIA+ community was celebrated, but also body positivity, sexuality, fetishes and actually every single aspect of a human being you can imagine. I felt safe and really enjoyed the expressive human beings that were celebrating this beautiful event. Celebration of diversity of all human beings is the core message that this event promotes. In comparison to the other Pride events that I visited over the summer, I felt definitely most safe during this event. Why? Although there was a kind of fence around the whole city centre that served as a sign to where the designated area of the Pride event was. At the end of that day, I was shocked to see a photo



on my Instagram timeline of a non-binary trans person with a face covered in blood. I immediately felt the need to send them a message to ask what had happened. They were just outside the designated “Pride” area, and there was no police present at that point. There were groups of anti-LGBTQIA+ people who were throwing glass bottles towards trans people. There had been more situations where people felt unsafe outside the designated Pride area, because there seemed to be a lot of aggressive people who actually take the time to project their own urge of committing violent acts towards innocent people. I have always wondered why people let themselves be so consumed in terms of time, effort and money to try to make the lives of other people a misery.

The Amsterdam Canal Pride was the last pride I visited during the summer, and I was actually surprised by the fact that I did not feel safe at all to express my gender identity. I noticed that this celebration has a different vibe than the pride in Cologne for example. The audience was mainly cis-straight people looking “at the monkeys” -as we say that in Dutch”. I do understand now where it comes from that people say that the pride is more a business opportunity for business that want to make money out of the rainbow flag and pride month. There was a lot of pinkwashing going on. Pinkwashing is when companies claim to be committed to something, in this case the LGBTQIA+ community, but don’t show any specific evidence that they do, except for example hiring a spot and boat to participate in the Amsterdam Canal Parade. Pinkwashing doesn’t always happen intentionally, because it is often the case that certain brands and businesses actually do care about the community. But when the community is being exploited for commercial purposes, like selling rainbow flags while the same company wouldn’t hire a transwoman for example. This happens so often, as I experienced this myself. I went for a job interview to companies like Albert Heijn and Shell, two huge corporations that promote themselves as so-called allies of the community and the importance of diversity. What was ironic, was that when I expressed that my gender identity is somewhere in the spectrum which is not aligned with heteronormative notions of a “man” and “woman”, is that both companies actually told me to just come to work as a “normal man”. When I asked what the meaning of a “normal man” is, both managers who interviewed couldn’t really answer my question. They simply said to express my feminine side in my own free time. The moment you exit in the streets next to the canals, it feels like your being thrown back into the “straight, white and male dominated world”. I was disappointed, yet I also see that the comparison I could make by going to different pride events over the summer is very beneficial to my research, as I have gained a lot more experience now in the way these events are taking place. Interesting was mainly that there were such huge differences between the different Pride events I visited over the summer. How beautiful would it be if we live in a world where people can truly express themselves, like they did on Christopher Street Day?

## 4.4 A Different Purpose of Dating Apps

A different purpose of dating apps. How? It started with the moment I was wondering how to approach the people who are against everything the whole LGBTQIA+ alphabet stands for. I came up with the idea that I would go on various dating apps, such as Tinder and Badoo where I'd clearly show myself in who I am, and how I identify in terms of gender. (Transfeminine) The idea was to approach at least 100 straight men and go into conversation with them like you would on a dating app. I was prepared on beforehand to deal with possible discrimination and/or disrespectful commentary. Of course, I dealt a lot with the standard "faggot", "you are disgusting" comments of 9 persons that I spoke to. When I tried to go into conversation with them, it ended up with a lot of insults. Ironically, they did push the "like" button when they saw my picture, the photo you find in the "Artist Statement" section of this paper. Getting these insults, confirmed my presumption that there are people who are maybe not ready to have a conversation about gender identity. I must say, it didn't really surprise me at all that some people are not able to have a conversation about something they have absolutely no knowledge about which leads to disinterest. As sad as it is, this is the truth a lot of people from the community have to deal with on a daily basis. It also shapes the result of the research that I was doing. Discrimination is still a huge part of this world, which is for me the exact starting point of the project in general. When I got this idea to experiment with these conversations on dating apps, I was asking myself the question in how deeply rooted toxic masculinity plays a role in the way people look at the community. At least 80% of those men told me that they actually don't care what genital someone has as long as they have a feminine appearance. It makes me wonder what role the genital of an individual plays in being attracted to someone? I think I can slightly conclude that being attracted to another person does not have solid rules when it comes to physical appearance and personality traits. Because when I spoke to other people about this matter, the answer really differs per person.

I was surprised by the amount of either neutral or positive reactions I received from the men I had a match with on the dating apps. From the 100 men I spoke to, at least 91 of them were actually very friendly and open about the whole LGBTQIA+ community. What I can conclude from the conversations I had, although they were mostly positive, is that there is a huge lack of knowledge when it comes to this theme. There was a lot of confusion on the meaning of all the letters. Only five out of all the men I spoke to actually knew about all the variety of genders there are. What I got out of all those conversations, is that I was positively surprised about the amount of people who are really interested in knowing more about the LGBTQIA+ community. I noticed that the straight men I got in contact with, were interested in knowing more about gender identity because they said to me that they were attracted to me either way. At least 20 guys told me that they never really thought about this matter but were very interested in getting to know me more, while at the same time gaining more information on the topic of gender. It felt closer to them because they could directly speak to me in this "safe chat room".

## 4.5. Polarisation

Increased societal acceptance and visibility of diversity, provokes people who feel more negatively about these matters and also raise their voices and express their opinions publicly. Deeply rooted polarization grows more and more because traditional beliefs are being reconsidered. This polarization may play a role, as people feel obliged to take up a position and speak up about this topic, either positively or negatively. And this way, you may just suddenly find out that you are attending a school that does not accept you. What is remarkable, is that not all 'letters' affect people in the same way. 'Generally speaking, the reactions to gender diversity are significantly more negative than to sexual diversity. The "T" group experiences the most violence, and the most serious violence, and as a consequence, suffers the most mental health issues. We often include this group in the LGBT group, but researchers are increasingly saying that they should be considered separately in analyses.' It is often said that "music brings people together", which might have a truth in it when it comes to the matter of gender identity and/or sexuality. From Lady Gaga to David Bowie, the huge fan bases of these artists speak for themselves.

## 5. Queer Arts & Music

Queer art, also known as LGBTQIA+ art or queer aesthetics, is used as an umbrella term for modern and contemporary artistic practises. There is no solid definition to describe the meaning of queer art as a whole. Fluidity in terms of gender identity or sexuality is a huge part of the community, that's what makes it even harder to grasp the core of queerness. Though, queerness and political correctness are the exact opposites of each other when it comes to the core. Queerness is an act of resistance against the heteronormative view on gender and sexuality. The art itself doesn't necessarily have to be about queerness, because the experience of the audience can also feed the art form.

### 5.1. Artists In Relation to Queer

The fear of queer has been embodied by various artists in the past and present. For this project, I chose three artists to focus on: David Bowie, Lady Gaga & Anohni. They all have their own way of implementing queerness in their artistic works somehow. I have been interested in these artists in specific because not only their music speaks really well to me, but also the message they intentionally or unintentionally bring across about queerness. I focused on the way they implement queerness in their



David Bowie, 1991

works, but also the elements they use in either their performances or music that refer to their own queerness or the LGBTQIA+ community.

Let's start David Bowie as an example, he creates spaces for fans where they can perform queerness, without necessarily being queer. The reason I chose to analyze his works is because his experiences resonate so much with the fear that queer people have. The authenticity that he embodied played the main role in his artistic practise, but also triggered a lot of questions in the outside world. He was fluid in terms of gender and sexuality, and expressed himself however he felt like. In a recent documentary *"Moonage Daydream"*, Bowie's iconic vision on life came through via his artistic works other than music only, such as performance, art photography, sculpturing and painting. There have been a lot of movies, exhibitions and documentaries about him that tried to put him into an impossible box. Bowie was definitely a precursor when it comes to gender identity and sexuality. In the 70s, he was interviewed and asked about his alleged "women shoes" and why he wore them. For him, the shoes were nothing but shoes only, and reacted that it is just an object that has absolutely nothing to do with the sex of someone.

During his performances, and also in his whole being, Bowie wore whatever he felt like. He stepped out of the binary gender limits. People back then, and still nowadays, don't understand the fact that gender identity and sexuality *can* be fluid. The word "queer" didn't have the meaning that it has nowadays. The word "Queer" dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was synonymous to words like "odd, strange or peculiar". but his unintentional rebellion on the boxes that we as a society want to put everyone in, made him a very unique person in that timeframe. He expressed his gender through alter-egos. Alternative sexualities and gender identities was even less accepted back then, than it is now. What's ironic, is that people did have a greater understanding and acceptance when someone expressed their gender identities or sexuality when they were on stage only. He was never asked in a public interview about how courageous it is for someone to cross the borders of gender.

Instead, he was often asked why "he as a man" wears so-called "women clothing", where the presumption was made that he identifies as a man. This is exactly what queer people faced back then and nowadays whenever they step out of the heteronormative



limitations on gender. It goes from getting questions that are obviously asked from a heteronormative perspective where people ask such superficial questions full of assumptions on how they think you are, to aggression or abusive behaviour because you are expressing an identity that does not fit this heteronormative vision of “men and women”. In relation to the fear of queer, he has embodied various letters from the LGBTQIA+ community and his fierce has inspired a lot of people, but also myself as an artist and person. By analysing his works, I have learned more about the importance of authenticity within an artistic practice and that one can embody a theme without necessarily speaking about the topic itself. David Bowie is not only an icon in music, but also his ungraspable sexual orientation and gender identity. He has left the world with a lot of unanswered questions, on which the answers may never be really clear.

Lady Gaga, on the contrary, performs queerness and identifies as queer as well by defying expectations of gender roles. She has the intention to express her queerness and bisexuality. She knows how big scaled her audience is, and that she's able to reach so much people all around the world. Her whole album of *“Born This Way”* (2011) had references to the community. The title track of the album has an iconic lyric in it: *No matter gay, straight or bi, lesbian transgender life, I'm on the right track, baby I was born to survive. No matter black, white or beige, chola or orient made, I'm on the right track baby I was born to be brave*<sup>10</sup>. She represents the community as a whole with this lyric. Her works are a great example on how art can be used to address sensitive themes or topics. When she performed *“You and I”* at the MTV awards in 2011, she performed as “Joe Calderone”, her male alter ego. When you see the title of the song, the immediate association you have is to a love song. Partially, this is true. She sings about the love her alter egos have for each other and depicts them as being a “couple”. She starts with a monologue where Joe is complaining about Lady Gaga, like they have been married for a couple of years. She says “Lady Gaga is a beautiful star in the sky, but who am I?”, referring to the fact that she neglected her male alter ego for a very long time. Her male alter ego is angry, that he has been repressed for a long time, slightly referring to society and the acceptance of people who are non-binary, or any gender that identifies with both male and female.



Lady Gaga, *You and I* performance at MTV Awards, 11

This leads to the reason I wanted to do research on Lady Gaga. It took courage for her as an artist who just broke through to make such statement on one of the biggest platforms possible. By doing this, she represented the community and merged them with pop-culture. I

<sup>10</sup> Lady Gaga, *“Born This Way”*, 2011

have been to various concerts of her in 2012, 2015 and 2018, and saw with my own eyes the great influence she has on her audience. Everyone dresses the way they want in the safe space that she creates with her concerts, something I also felt myself. I have never experienced this feeling again at concerts from other artists. With Lady Gaga, you never really know what you can expect when she goes on stage. She is a rebel at heart. She once had an appearance on *Rupaul's Drag Race*, where she spoke with the drag queens about her own persona which she also described as being "drag". From her perspective, which she shares with Rupaul herself, is that everything is a performance. *We are all born naked, and the rest is drag.*"



Anohni, Denmark 2017

Anohni, born as Antony Hegarty in Chichester, England, has a very different way of expressing her gender identity. Her vulnerability and fragility are the core of her artistic practise, which you can see and hear clearly in her songs and performances. She was influenced by Boy George, in terms of how he expressed himself in being androgynous and embracing this proudly. She did know from an early age on that she was transgender. Anohni doesn't necessarily implement queerness in her music, but more in the way she presents herself throughout performance. Her personal story is being heard throughout her her songs. The sound of her voice is being described as "mysteriously feminine", which I totally agree with. The difference with Lady Gaga is that she has no intention to address the topics of gender in a specific performance or song. It's being heard throughout her whole artistic practice. Her queer and trans identity shine through in all she does, artistically. She openly told the world that she has been struggling a lot with her gender identity. The difference with David Bowie is that it's very clear how she identifies in terms of gender and sexuality. What makes it hard for Anohni in this case, is that the world has a very harsh vision when they know how someone identifies. The world could never really grasp the way Bowie was, what made it very hard to judge him on the way he was. The experiences that Anohni has, resonate with myself in terms of expressing my gender identity. She has never let herself be held from expressing her unique identity. For instance, when she was nominated for "Best Original Song Academy Award" for the song "Manta Ray" in the film "Racing Extinction", she was not invited to perform the song and decided later on to boycott the event. The suspicion was that it had to do with her gender identity. In the song she sings about her children dying inside of her, what could be a reference to the fact that trans people often have to give up on their wish to get children, whenever they'd choose for a sex change.

### *My children are dying in me<sup>2</sup>*

This is clearly another reminder on the importance of talking and addressing this theme over and over again, until we all live in a world where we feel accepted and celebrated for who we

<sup>11</sup> Rupaul, "Born Naked", 2014

<sup>12</sup> Anohni, J. Ralph "Manta Ray", 2015

are. What I take from all the different aspects of these so-called “queer artists”, is that I will keep expressing my gender identity throughout my artistic practice. Words aren’t always needed to express any kind of topic, that’s what came across very clearly from the works of David Bowie, Lady Gaga and Anohni. One can decide whether a performance is meant to be queer, which doesn’t mean that the world sees it that way as well. I believe in the intention of the artist to be of great importance, which later on is being interpreted by the audience. There is no right or wrong in how an artwork is experienced. That’s the beauty of art. Although, elements in terms of clothing, visuals and choice of words greatly influence the works of an artist, and whatever their message may be.

## 6. Conclusion

The fear of queer works both ways, meaning that there is a fear of the unknown from non-LGBTQIA+ people. There is a relation between discrimination and the educational system that doesn’t implement any of this during the time you grow up. Discrimination and disrespectful behaviour towards queer people lead to fear as well, which often grows from not-knowing. Often, a lot of people don’t really know what it means to be queer or trans, or even being attracted to the same sex as yourself, let alone that they know how the mental health is affected of people who are not accepted for the way they are. There is an urgency for change in the way we speak and think about the community. The mental health on the long term and emotional well-being on short term of people from the community is heavily influenced by the discrimination they face in their daily lives. The numbers don’t lie on mental health issues from queer people, just like the stories I heard during the interviews with people from the community. I immersed myself within the queer community during the Pride events, where I experienced a lot of fear among the people (including myself) that went outside of the designated “Pride” areas. Pride is still needed, and I would love to perform there.

According to the interviews I did, I can conclude that there is a large-scale fear among queer people in expressing themselves. This really differs per person and does not limit itself to a specific group of people. I believe that everyone, and that definitely includes cis-straight people, is kind of trapped in a society where limitations are being put on from the moment we are born. The queer community of Limburg is currently not really existing or visible, because a lot of people are just very scared to express themselves. There is a great need for smaller-scaled events and safe spaces that are easily accessible for those who feel like they cannot express their true identities in daily life. I see it as an invitation as a maker, artist and researcher to spread the word on the importance of tackling this problem, but also providing these safe spaces for people from the community. I also want to be an artist that creates safe spaces, for instance in the form of concerts where people feel safe enough to express themselves the way they want. Artists like Bowie and Gaga have given me tools to embody queerness within performances and music in specific. They broke through their own fears to perform the way they did, just like I want to do when I am going to perform.

Anohni’s works reflect my own fear when it comes to expressing myself. It is a process that she went through and I have realized it now that certain things like expression and staying close to yourself takes time to grow. In some situations, it’s better to speak directly about a topic in a creative way, like Lady Gaga does often on purpose in her performances and songs. The aim of the performance should be very clear for the artist and tested whenever one wants

to bring across a specific message via performance or any other artistic practice. Although Bowie never really spoke about his queerness in his works, he did embody it as a human being and therefore as an Artist. Bowie and Anohni inspired me even more to stay as close as possible to myself in my artistic practice, but in specific when I will do a project on gender identity. I mapped the fear of queer by immersing myself into the queer community, but also in the non-LGBTQIA+ “outside world” and some clear points came out of that; the majority of the people experience fear whenever they walk outside at night, people from the LGBTQIA+ community have way higher chances of suffering from mental health issues and I definitely learned about the origins of this fear: discrimination and violence. There is a relation between being queer and suffering from mental health issues due to discrimination and violent actions. A change of mind can lead to a change of heart, is what I took from my dating experiment, but also that this could become a way of working for research purposes in the future. It was scary to approach people about the topic of gender identity and mental health, because there was a definite risk of receiving disrespectful remarks. Biting through this fear has resulted in growing as a researcher and artist, because the dating experiment was a definite success. It could be the case that accessible platforms like these dating apps can provide as a safe space for both parties, to get closer to one another. I think that there should be a platform that focusses on speaking about gender identity and/or sexual orientation, maybe even in the form of a dating app. As it was such a success, because of the large amount of surprisingly positive responses I got, I think that this way of doing research is very effective in spreading information about gender identity and sexual orientation. This way of working has influenced my research strategy for future projects because of this great experience. People are definitely feared of the unknown, that’s common knowledge. But it seems that there are ways for society to come closer towards each other and hopefully decrease the polarization that is so alive in these days. In comparison to the moment I started writing this paper, I am way more aware now of where the problems have grown from and know more specifically what I can do as an artist. I learned there are actually ways to tackle this topic, for example through dating apps. Back then, I would never have believed that I would be brave enough to go directly to the core of problematic behavior, face possible discrimination and speak with straight men about the topic of gender and sexuality.

I dream of creating safe spaces in the future, which will be part of a performance. I know that I can play a big role in providing these safe spaces. In order to create these safe spaces, I want to work with new artistic research questions and people to work with. My alter-ego “Sammy Malary” is an artistic project that I embody more and more, every single day. She clearly reflects who I am and what I stand for. I envision an audiovisual performance where video, visuals and me performing the songs provide as tools to translate the things I want to say into a work of art. I am currently working on songs about fear, gender identity and mental health that will reflect back on the research I have done for this paper. When I am on stage, I will be dressed as my “feminine” me, which clearly contradicts the deep “male” voice I have, at least for the people that don’t know me. I think that already brings across a message or mindfuck, which I love to do, as I don’t perform as a drag queen anymore, but just as me. There is a lot I have to say to the world, and that has even become clearer during this whole process. The criticism on society in combination with my gender identity translated into performance and music is a unique way of addressing these problems I have learned about the origins of the problematic behavior from society that results into the many burdens queer people face, so I know where to tackle the problem. I want to perform not only at Pride events, but I want to a whole club tour in the future with my concept. The satisfaction I experienced with going to

the core of the problem on dating apps, tastes like a lot more. I don't believe in the binary nonsense that we all have to deal with. It brings more problems with itself than it does any good, and that is exactly what I want to speak about more through the audiovisual performance of my dreams.



*Sammy Malary, 2022*

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## 8. Appendix

### Interview Questions

What is your full name, pronoun & age?

Where do you live?

How do you identify, in terms of gender and sexuality? (For example, Gay – Cis-Gender\*)

Have you ever felt unsafe to express your identity towards other people?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe would you feel with the idea of walking on the streets at night, alone?

What is your view on Pride festivals? Do you think they are still needed?

What's causing the problems around people who identify differently than cis-straight?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe do you feel to express your gender identity and/or sexuality in public space? This counts for all types of genders and sexualities.

Do you think that the acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community in your region is increasing or decreasing?

What do you think could be done to improve this?

How would you think that the mental health is affected when people in public space and/or one's family and friends don't accept someone the way they are? Please answer as broadly as possible

Have you ever experienced mental stress due to expressing your true identity in public space?

### Lady Gaga – Born This Way Lyrics

It doesn't matter if you love him or capital H-I-M  
Just put your paws up  
'Cause you were born this way, baby  
My mama told me when I was young, "We are all born superstars"  
She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on in the glass of her boudoir  
"There's nothing wrong with loving who you are"  
She said, "'Cause He made you perfect, babe  
So hold your head up, girl, and you'll go far"  
Listen to me when I say  
I'm beautiful in my way 'cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way  
Don't hide yourself in regret, just love yourself, and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way (born this way)  
Ooh, there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way  
Baby, I was born this way (born this way)  
Ooh, there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way  
Right track, baby, I was born this way  
Don't be a drag, just be a queen  
Don't be a drag, just be a queen  
Don't be a drag, just be a queen  
Don't be (don't be, don't be)  
Give yourself prudence and love your friends  
Subway kid, rejoice your truth  
In the religion of the insecure, I must be myself, respect my youth  
A different lover is not a sin, believe capital H-I-M (hey, hey, hey)

I love my life, I love this record, and  
Mi amore vole fe, yah (same DNA)  
I'm beautiful in my way 'cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way  
Don't hide yourself in regret, just love yourself, and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way  
Ooh, there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way  
Baby, I was born this way (born this way)  
Ooh, there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way  
Don't be a drag, just be a queen  
Whether you're broke or evergreen  
You're Black, white, beige, chola descent  
You're Lebanese, you're Orient'  
Whether life's disabilities left you outcast, bullied, or teased  
Rejoice and love yourself today  
'Cause, baby, you were born this way  
No matter gay, straight, or bi', lesbian, transgender life  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born to survive  
No matter Black, white or beige, chola, or Orient' made  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born to be brave  
I'm beautiful in my way 'cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way  
Don't hide yourself in regret, just love yourself, and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way, yeah  
Ooh, there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way  
Baby, I was born this way (born this way)  
Ooh, there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way  
I was born this way, hey  
I was born this way, hey  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way, hey  
I was born this way, hey  
I was born this way, hey  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way, hey  
Same DNA, but born this way  
Same DNA, but born this way