Beyond the Binary:
The Flemish Non-Binary Experience in Tourism and the Need for Change

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the tourism experiences of Flemish non-binary individuals, examining how gender diversity intersects with travel, hospitality, and the use of public space. Situated within a broader framework of queer and gender studies, the research seeks to understand how non-binary people perceive and navigate tourism environments that are often shaped by normative assumptions about gender. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with non-binary participants living in Flanders. It explores the specific challenges they encounter, such as misgendering, the absence of gender-neutral facilities, and discomfort or exclusion in binary-gendered spaces, as well as the strategies they adopt to assert their identities, ensure safety, and create affirming travel experiences. The findings point to a tourism landscape that frequently fails to accommodate gender diversity in meaningful ways, perpetuating marginalization and emotional labor for non-binary travelers. This thesis concludes by calling for more inclusive practices in tourism design and policy, emphasizing the need for increased awareness, deeper understanding, and structural inclusivity across all levels of the tourism industry.

Keywords: non-binary, gender identity, tourism, transgender, LGBTQIA+, queer theory

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1. Glossary of Terms

Cisgender: someone who does not identify as trans (ILGA, n.d.), and therefore whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth (Van Kleef et al., 2023).

Gender identity: how someone identifies themselves and truly feels, which may be different from the sex someone was assigned at birth (ILGA, n.d.).

LGBTQIA+: LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more, and refers to sexual orientations and gender identities (Mukerjee et al., 2022). Some studies, however, use shorter versions like LGBT or LGB(T)(Q)(I)(A)(+) because, throughout history, more letters were added to be more inclusive of other sexual orientations and gender identities that were becoming more researched as society modernized and gender language was expanded, ultimately landing on LGBTQIA+ (Mukerjee et al., 2022, Wiseman, 2018; Zerriny, 2022). Where shortened versions are used in existing studies, the acronym used in that particular study will be adopted for accuracy, as this highlights the differences between studies and the inclusion or exclusion of certain queer identities within LGBTQIA+ studies over time.

Non-binary: someone who does not (exclusively) identify themselves within the gender binary of 'man' or 'woman' (ILGA, n.d.; Monro, 2019). They may identify as neither male nor female, as both, or as having a fluid gender identity that may shift over time (Zisin, 2024). Experiences of gender identity vary greatly amongst non-binary people (HRC Foundation, 2024; Movisie, 2023). Non-binary falls under the wide transgender identity umbrella (Transgender Infopunt, 2022), which is a person whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth (Kennis et al., 2022).

Queer: someone who identifies themselves beyond traditional gender categories or heteronormative social norms (ILGA, n.d.).

2. Introduction

Tourism is often celebrated as a liberating practice: an opportunity to explore new places, connect with others, and break away from the routines of everyday life. However, the freedoms it promises are not equally accessible to all. For individuals who challenge dominant societal norms, such as non-binary individuals, travel frequently entails a heightened sense of caution, constant negotiation, and increased exposure to potential risks (Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019). While research on LGB issues in tourism has gained momentum in recent years, the TQIA+ segment of LGBTQIA+, including non-binary identities, remains significantly underrepresented in academic literature and industry discourse (Lee et al., 2023; Ong et al., 2020). Consequently, tourism environments continue to be structured by binary gender norms, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity, rendering non-binary experiences often invisible or marginalized (Puar, 2002; Waitt, 2011).

3. Research Aim

This study explores the Flemish[1] non-binary experience in accessing and participating in tourism, examining how binary structures embedded in the heteronormative world of tourism shape the experiences of non-binary individuals. By highlighting the challenges they face, it aims to amplify non-binary voices and expose systemic inequalities that remain under-researched in tourism studies (Lee et al., 2023). This leads to the following research question:

What Challenges do Flemish Non-Binary Individuals Encounter in Participating in Tourism?

The research seeks not only to contribute academically but also to raise broader awareness and provide industry suggestions for a more inclusive travel industry, moving beyond binary frameworks to foster more inclusive and accessible travel experiences for people of all gender identities. The final paper will be shared with all participants, allowing them to see shared experiences and fostering a sense of community. It will also be distributed to the organizations involved in the survey's dissemination, who may share it further within their networks. Additionally, the study will be made accessible to University of Groningen students and presented at the Campus Fryslân conference in June 2025.

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[1] See *5.2 Study Area* for the rationale behind selecting Flanders as the focus of this study.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory

4.1.1 Why Queer Theory?

Vincent (2018) emphasizes that a crucial aspect of researching trans communities is developing a thorough understanding of both the relevant literature and the lived experiences of the demographic. This includes engaging with the group's history and its ongoing experiences of marginalization and discrimination. In line with this, I have chosen queer theory as the theoretical framework for this study. It provides critical tools for examining how dominant norms surrounding gender and sexuality shape social experiences, in this case, in traveling. It allows for a deeper engagement with the histories and structures that marginalize non-binary individuals, while also offering a lens through which to critically analyze how tourism spaces reproduce normative gender expectations.

By grounding this research in queer theory, the study not only centers non-binary voices but also challenges the heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions that often go unquestioned in tourism contexts. This framework serves as both a conceptual foundation and a methodological guide, informing the development of arguments and supporting the analytical process (Vinz, 2023) while also clarifying the approach taken to address the research question (Lederman & Lederman, 2015).

4.1.2 Queer Theory

Queer theory emerged through several historical, linguistic, political, and academic developments. The term 'queer' evolved from meaning 'to question' or 'inquire' in the 14th century (Thatcher, 2015) to 'strange' or 'odd' (Halperin, 2003). Initially used as a derogatory term to marginalize homosexuals (Jagose, 1996; Thatcher, 2015), it was reclaimed in the 20th century by LGBTQIA+ communities, transforming into an inclusive and empowering umbrella term for diverse sexual and gender identities (Manning & Adams, 2021; Thatcher, 2015). This shift was deeply intertwined with political activism, particularly during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which intensified homophobia but also ignited queer resistance (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016; Jagose, 1996; Malinowitz & Fuss, 1993). In this context, queer theory, though not yet fully named, began to emerge as a framework that moved beyond fixed identity categories to interrogate broader discourses of heteronormativity and the societal systems that construct

and regulate sexual and gender norms (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016; Malinowitz & Fuss, 1993; Manning & Adams, 2021).

The theoretical underpinnings of queer theory were significantly shaped by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) (Halperin, 2003). Butler (1990), one of the most influential figures in the theoretical development of gender theories, argued that gender is not tied to biology but is performative: produced through repeated acts, behaviors, and language. She exposed gender as a socially constructed identity category which genders individuals before they have the opportunity to explore their own identity, and critiqued the heteronormative binary system, advocating for self-identification and counter-discourses that challenge dominant gender narratives (Butler, 1990). Essentially, she argued that gender is something we 'do', not something we 'are' (Butler, 1990). Sedgwick (1990) similarly critiqued binary thinking, highlighting how queer identities, especially in the West, were culturally and historically constructed to be hidden or "in the closet", reinforcing heteronormativity. She argued that sexual identity is not fixed or innate but shaped through (cultural) discourse and social power, and that ignorance about queerness is sometimes actively maintained in dominant discourse (Sedgwick, 1990).

In 1990, Teresa de Lauretis formally introduced the term 'queer theory', using it to critique the homogenization within gay and lesbian studies and to assert a more radical, inclusive theoretical framework (Halperin, 2003). She urged that both equality and recognition of queer-specific differences are necessary for political inclusion and resistance against cultural homogenization (De Lauretis, 1991). This formalization of 'queer' as a theory marked a pivotal starting point for its rapid academic development and the diverse contributions that shaped its theoretical embodiment (Jagose, 1996). Annamarie Jagose, for example, added that queer theory is highly necessary, as "normative models of identity do not suffice in representing … postmodern understandings of gender, identity, sexuality, power and resistance" (Jagose, 1996, p. 71), emphasizing that queer theory resists the naturalness of categories such as 'male', 'female', and 'heterosexual', exposing how certain identities are normalized and thus privileged (Jagose, 1996). Rooted in poststructuralist thought, queer theory challenges the idea of a binary truth (Waitt et al., 2008; Woodward et al., 2009). This stands in contrast to structuralism's binary view of society (Jagose, 1996), particularly concerning gender and sexuality (Waitt et al., 2008; Watson, 2005). Later, Puar (2002) extended queer theory to include equal access to space and mobility, including participation in fields like tourism.

Lastly, it is important to note that queer theory is constantly evolving (Watson, 2005), as the concept of 'queer' is fluid (Jagose, 1996) and the definitions of normalcy and marginalization,

and who is 'othered' in society, are continuously changing (Diley, 1999). More modern queer theory interrogates the mechanisms by which people are marginalized and others are normalized, while exploring through which elements of life people are driven away from each other and towards the normative (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020). It does not merely deconstruct existing categories; it also empowers marginalized voices and explores questions that have rarely been broached as they contradict traditional knowledge (Diley, 1999; Manning & Adams, 2021).

4.1.3 Queer Theory vs. Feminism vs. Gay and Lesbian Studies

Queer theory, emerging from gay and lesbian studies, broadens the scope to include diverse gender and sexual identities, such as transgender experiences (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020; Manning & Adams, 2021; Oswin, 2008). Unlike gay and lesbian studies, which often focus on fixed identity categories, queer theory challenges the stability of identities like 'gay' or 'lesbian' and questions binary thinking about gender and sexuality (Oswin, 2008; Thatcher, 2015).

Queer theory also shares significant common ground with feminism, particularly in critiquing gender norms, power imbalances, and socially constructed inequalities (Denker, 2021; Watson, 2005). Both challenge dominant structures, amplify marginalized voices, and promote social change by examining how intersecting identities such as race, class, and sexuality shape gendered experiences and reinforce systems of oppression like racism, sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchy (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020). However, again, queer theory goes further by rejecting fixed identity categories altogether. While feminism often centers women's experiences, queer theory deconstructs concepts like 'woman,' 'gay,' or 'straight,' viewing them as socially constructed (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020; Jagose, 1996; Waitt et al., 2008). It critiques feminism's reliance on the category 'woman' and highlights how early feminist thought often excluded the experiences of women of color, lesbians, and transgender individuals (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020). Lastly, queer theory also expands the conversation to include issues such as gender ambiguity and medical interventions like gender-affirming surgery (Denker, 2021; Jagose, 1996).

4.1.4 Queer Theory Critiques

Every theory has its limitations, and queer theory is no exception. One core concern is that queer experiences are too diverse to be contained within a single theoretical framework or narrative, as queer lives involve distinct desires, behaviors, social dynamics, and institutional needs that differ from non-queer experiences, complicating any unified narrative (Dilley, 1999; Thatcher, 2015; Vincent, 2018).

Furthermore, early queer theory has been criticized for centering white, cisgender gay male perspectives, often excluding transgender identities and lacking attention to intersectional factors like race, class, and religion (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016; Manning & Adams, 2021). Critics further highlight queer theory's early emphasis on privileged voices, neglecting sex workers, people of color, poor and homeless communities, and trans individuals, which led to significant gaps in representation and inclusivity, further marginalizing those already excluded from society (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020; Manning & Adams, 2021). This homonormativity is both exclusionary and unreflective of the broader spectrum of queer realities (Oswin, 2008). Only recently has queer theory begun to meaningfully engage with intersectional approaches, broadening its analysis to include race, social class, and gender in more complex ways, embracing the complexity of identity (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020; Manning & Adams, 2021). This shift marks an important step toward a more inclusive and representative queer discourse (Oswin, 2008). However, as queer becomes more mainstream, there is also concern about its commodification, losing its critical edge and becoming a brand rather than a political stance (Watson, 2005).

4.2   Queer Theory and the Social Reality of Queer and Non-binary Lives

To sum up, queer theory fundamentally challenges binary gender systems, offering a critical lens through which to understand the lived experiences of non-binary individuals whose identities are often rendered invisible within structures built on binary thinking (Oakleaf & Richmond, 2017; Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019). These frameworks still dominate many aspects of life, making non-binary individuals feel excluded or 'othered' (Vijlbrief et al., 2019). In this section, we explore the lived experiences of queer and non-binary individuals, highlighting how the theoretical framework of queer theory intersects with social realities.

While increased visibility of queer identities can foster empathy and reduce discrimination (Felten & Broekroelofs, 2020), non-heteronormative individuals are still often perceived as threats to dominant heteronormative societal norms (Waitt et al., 2008). Although non-binary identities are frequently perceived as new, gender diversity has existed across cultures and histories (Movisie, 2023; Richards et al., 2016). Western colonialism played a central role in spreading binary gender norms, erasing these diverse understandings (O'Sullivan, 2021). This systemic erasure has real consequences: across the European Union (EU), trans individuals report ongoing discrimination, exclusion, stress, and discomfort, which often leads them to avoid public spaces, conceal their identities, alter their appearances, and live in fear (Bockting

et al., 2013; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; Stonewall, 2018). Many feel pressured to 'pass' as cisgender to avoid harm (Oakleaf and Richmond, 2017); an act that leads to heightened anxiety and depression (Bockting et al., 2013). Consequently, public spaces such as pools or locker rooms become sites of avoidance rather than inclusion (Oakleaf & Richmond, 2017). A study in Flanders showed similar findings: non-binary individuals often limit their gender expression due to fear of harassment, frequently avoid expression through appearance, do not consistently live according to their gender identity, and avoid certain locations for safety reasons (Motmans et al., 2017). As Kennis et al. (2022) summarized perfectly, non-binary individuals often feel pressured to conform to societal norms, find it difficult to live authentically according to their gender identity, and frequently experience a lack of belonging or supportive community. Furthermore, studies affirm that the LGBTQIA+ community faces disproportionately high levels of stress, depression, and severe mental health issues (Haas et al., 2014; King et al., 2008; de Lange et al., 2023; Motmans et al., 2015; Richards et al., 2016).

These patterns align with the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 1995), which highlights how chronic stress and discrimination, stemming from societal stigmatization and the experience of being 'othered,' negatively impact the mental health of queer individuals (Meyer, 1995; Richards et al., 2016). While queer visibility has increased, particularly in parts of the Global North, supported by media, popular culture, and public figures (Vijlbrief et al., 2019; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2015), this progress has not been mirrored in global advancements on gender recognition rights, which have stalled or even reversed in some cases (Chiam et al., 2020). In Belgium, for example, recent research reveals a rise in homophobia among youth, including increased acceptance of violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals (Van Droogenbroeck, 2025). Such developments indicate a troubling social climate and underline the importance of advocacy, interventions, and public policy initiatives to challenge structural discrimination (Bockting et al., 2013). This urgency is further emphasized by findings showing that the public understanding of trans identities across the EU remains limited (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Increasing awareness and acceptance of diverse gender identities not only improves the well-being of non-binary people (Movisie, 2023) but also benefits other marginalized groups. For instance, gender-neutral bathrooms have been shown to enhance feelings of safety and inclusion for women and people of color (Chaney & Sanchez, 2017). Ultimately, what many trans and non-binary individuals seek is straightforward yet essential: a sense of belonging (Vijlbrief et al., 2019) and being able to live 'normal' (Oswin, 2008).

4.2.1 Gender Markers

Gender markers on identity documents remain a significant and highly contested example of discrimination against non-binary and genderqueer individuals. Accurate markers are essential for social and legal recognition and are linked to improved mental health outcomes (Bauer et al., 2015; NYCLU, 2024), highlighting the importance of offering a gender-neutral option, such as 'X', for those outside the binary. The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly acknowledges this need in Resolution 2048, urging national parliaments to consider a third option (Council of Europe, 2015). While EU regulations allow gender markers to be omitted from ID cards, passports still require them, though the use of an 'X' *is* permitted (European Union, 2004; 2019). As of May 2025, 11 countries provide an 'X' option nationwide, with four more offering it sub-nationally (ILGA, 2024). The Netherlands adopted it in 2018, but few have made the change due to a complex and costly legal process (Palm, 2023; Transgender Netwerk, 2024), underscoring the persistent barriers non-binary individuals face in accessing recognition through gender markers.

Belgium, by contrast, lacks an 'X' option, though having an estimated 55,000 trans people, of whom approximately 22% identify as non-binary (Motmans et al., 2017; Transgender Infopunt, 2022), and despite the 2018 Belgian Transgender Law stating that everyone should be able to be registered according to their gender identity (Verberckmoes 2022). Since 1993, over 4,400 Belgians have changed their gender marker from 'M' to 'F' or vice versa on official ID documents, yet many choose not to do so because neither option aligns with their identity, limited by the binary nature of the system (Instituut voor de Gelijkheid van Vrouwen en Mannen, 2024). A study of transgender individuals in Flanders further strengthens this point, with 56.9% expressing a desire to change their gender marker, highlighting the pressing need for a gender-neutral alternative (Motmans et al., 2017). However, while such a marker can improve visibility and belonging (Ashley, 2021; Joemmanbaks & De Graaf, 2023), it is important to note that non-binary identity encompasses a wide spectrum of identities, and thus, an 'X' marker may not fully capture the diversity of these identities (Ashley, 2021; Monro, 2019). Furthermore, it may also reinforce otherness or invite discrimination (Cameron & Stinson, 2019; T'Sjoen et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the inclusion of gender markers on identity documents remains a topic of active debate, with some arguing that their complete removal is the only fully inclusive option (Ashley, 2021; Cannoot, 2021). Regardless of the outcome, legal reforms must be co-designed with gender-diverse communities to ensure they meet real needs (Ashley, 2021; Cannoot, 2021; Movisie, 2023). Belgium's upcoming 2025 reform highlights the shortcomings of the current

approach: while it will allow individuals to remove their gender marker from their ID upon formal request, merely removing the 'M' or 'F' does not address the need for a truly inclusive solution (Çavaria, 2025; Renson, 2025; Transgender Infopunt, 2025).

4.3 Queer Tourism Studies

This section arrives at the core focus of the research: the experiences of queer and non-binary individuals in tourism. Building on the foundational concepts of queer theory, it examines how societal norms, particularly those related to gender and sexuality, shape and influence these experiences. Unfortunately, heteronormativity and the binary conception of gender persist in tourism (studies), often disregarding the fluidity of gender identities (Kendall, 2024) and marginalizing non-binary and gender-fluid individuals (Lee et al., 2023). One study found that in less than ten percent of quantitative studies, two or more gender classifications are used (Lee et al., 2023), and while sustainable and ethical tourism are big trends and developments in the current tourism landscape, gender is often excluded from the definitions they use for sustainable and ethical tourism (Tivers, 2011). This lack of representation reflects a broader issue of gender discrimination and the failure to recognize diverse gender identities, contributing to reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and highlighting an ongoing research gap in the field (Cameron & Stinson, 2019; Tivers, 2011).

A study by Olson and Reddy-Best (2019) highlights that transgender and gender non-conforming individuals face unique challenges while traveling, including increased emotional labor, behavioral adjustments, and safety concerns. Participants in their study noted that the tourism industry often lacks knowledge on how to respectfully treat gender non-conforming individuals and how to create inclusive environments. For instance, the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) regulations, which require passengers to be searched by an officer of the same sex, can pose significant challenges for trans individuals, especially when their appearance or legal sex does not align with their gender identity (Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019). This misalignment can lead to complications, such as when security personnel might feel body features that do not correspond with the sex listed on a person's passport, especially if the person uses gender-affirming items like breast forms or penile prosthetics (Uitterlinden, 2019). Additionally, presenting identity documents while traveling can be a source of significant stress when a person's appearance does not align with the sex on their documents (Olson and Reddy-Best, 2019). Furthermore, the tourism industry frequently homogenizes LGBTQIA+ travelers, promoting a narrow, marketable image of the 'ideal' queer tourist: typically white, gay, male, and economically privileged (Puar, 2002; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2015). This exclusionary marketing fails to represent the full spectrum of queer identities and

experiences (Puar, 2002; Waitt et al., 2008). By doing so, it marginalizes non-binary and other queer individuals even more, reinforcing the distinction between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' queer bodies (Waitt, 2011).

Queer tourism itself, often referred to as the 'pink economy' (Waitt et al., 2008), is shaped by complex transnational dynamics, as it largely depends on the extent to which queer individuals are recognized as legitimate human beings or citizens in different countries (Puar, 2002). Waitt (2011) highlights the importance of creating leisure and tourism spaces where queer people can feel safe and be their authentic selves, but unfortunately, not all regions are progressing in this regard, and some are even actively regressing. For instance, recent political shifts in the United States (US), such as not recognizing transgender and non-binary identities, pose serious risks for queer travelers (Lecluyse, 2025), including detention and legal issues (Michiels, 2025). In response, several European countries, including Belgium and the Netherlands, have updated their travel advisories, urging transgender and non-binary travelers to research legislation and consult with their national US embassy before traveling (Huyghebaert, 2025; Lecluyse, 2025).

Similar to the US currently, many places remain unsafe for trans and non-binary individuals, further limiting their access to travel and opportunities to explore the world (Uitterlinden, 2019). Consequently, travel planning involves extensive research on LGBTQIA+ safety and legislation (Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019). Notably, 80% of LGBTQ[2] travelers avoid destinations that treat their LGBTQ communities poorly (Community Marketing & Insights, 2019), and, similar to day-to-day life, they often feel the need to modify their behavior out of fear of harassment (Hughes, 2002; Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019). Consequently, queer travelers prioritize destinations and accommodation with inclusive, non-judgmental environments and anti-discrimination policies (Community Marketing & Insights, 2019; Herjanto et al., 2023; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2015). However, identifying LGBTQ-friendly hotels can be difficult, and many travelers fear that revealing their identity may negatively impact the service they receive (Herjanto et al., 2023). Issues such as being assigned separate beds when booking a room with a same-sex partner, feeling unsafe showing public affection, and fear for people finding out they are queer, force some to conceal their identities or revert to the (binary) closet to not get into trouble (Beentjes, 2019; Herjanto et al., 2023; Uitterlinden, 2019). Echoing this, a study by Virgin Holidays (2016) found that just five percent of LGBTQ+ travelers feel comfortable showing affection abroad, and a significant percentage have experienced verbal

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[2] Example of how a shorter form of LGBTQIA+ was used in that particular study, highlighting exclusion of certain queer identities within queer studies. For additional information, see *1. Glossary of Terms*.

harassment while traveling. Non-binary individuals, in particular, may avoid public displays of affection or alter their behavior and choice of activities to avoid negative attention (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019). In sum, tourism remains deeply shaped by heteronormative and binary gender norms, often rendering queer and non-binary travelers invisible or unsafe. This underscores a pressing need for more inclusive practices, research, and policies that reflect the full spectrum of queer identities and experiences.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Method

Tourism research has traditionally been dominated by quantitative approaches, often overlooking the complexity and diversity of tourist subgroups (Schänzel & Smith, 2014). This is especially limiting when studying the LGBTQIA+ community, which encompasses a wide range of identities, needs, and motivations (Madinga et al., 2022; Schänzel & Smith, 2014). To better understand the distinct experiences and needs of non-binary tourists, this study adopted a qualitative approach. The research is grounded in the belief that no single, objective truth exists; rather, multiple subjective realities are shaped by individual experiences (Sears, 1992). The aim, therefore, is to "portray their worlds through the authenticity of their voices" (Sears, 1992, p. 148), allowing participants to articulate *their* realities on *their* terms.

In order to achieve this, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection, offering participants the flexibility to explore topics of personal significance (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) while allowing the researcher to explore deeper layers of attitudes, values, and motivations (Barriball et al., 1994). This method is particularly well-suited because it offers a window into personal and nuanced experiences, central to the study's focus (Sears, 1992). By centering non-binary individuals, who are often marginalized within heteronormative frameworks, this research aims to challenge traditional narratives and create space for those historically 'othered' (Dilley, 1999; Malinowitz & Fuss, 1993).

5.2 Study Area

Identities are often shaped in response to societal expectations rooted in binary gender norms within a heteronormative framework (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016). However, understandings of gender and sexuality vary widely across countries, influenced by historical, cultural, social, and political contexts (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016; Malinowitz & Fuss, 1993). What is

considered 'queer' can shift dramatically across regions; for example, same-sex marriage may be seen as radical in conservative societies but normalized in more liberal ones (Manning & Adams, 2021). Given these cultural differences, this study focuses only on Belgium, specifically the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders. Belgium is divided into linguistically distinct regions (see Figure 1), with Flanders and Wallonia each having unique cultural identities and political structures. To ensure cultural and linguistic relevance, the study is confined to Flanders, where the researcher is both fluent in the language and culturally embedded, supporting clearer communication and more accurate interpretation.

Flanders, counting approximately 6.8 million residents (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2024), is home to an estimated 55,000 transgender individuals (Van Caeneghem et al., 2015). This number has been growing with increased societal visibility and awareness (Motmans et al., 2017), but likely represents just the tip of the iceberg, as many remain hidden due to societal pressures (Transgender Infopunt, 2022). Around 22% of those Flemish transgender individuals identify as non-binary, equating to roughly 2% of the region's population (Motmans et al., 2017; Transgender Infopunt, 2022).
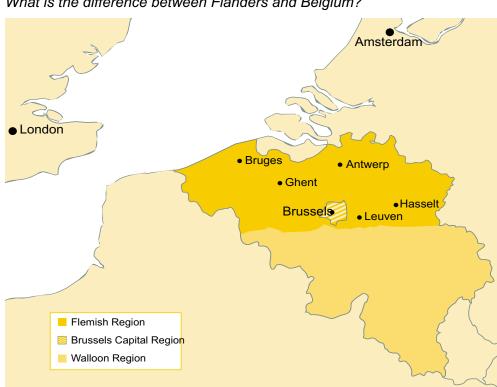
Figure 1

What is the difference between Flanders and Belgium?

Note. Adapted from *Belgium? Flanders? Brussels?* by Study in Flanders, n.d.

5.3   Participant Recruitment

To ensure diverse perspectives and reduce participant homogeneity (Vincent, 2018), three recruitment strategies were used. In total, 14 Flemish non-binary individuals of various ages (see Table 1) participated.

First, 13 Flemish LGBTQIA+ organizations were contacted with study details and a request to share the call for participants. Seven organizations responded positively and shared the call via Facebook and newsletters, resulting in seven participants. Second, snowball sampling was used, where interviewees were invited to refer others (Goodman, 1961). This yielded five participants. Lastly, I publicly posted the call for participation on my Facebook page, which yielded two more participants.

Table 1

Participant age ranges

Age range	Number of participants
18-24	3
25-34	5
35-44	3
45-54	1
55-64	2
65+	0
TOTAL	**14**

5.4   Data Collection and Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted in March and April 2025, lasting between 35 and 65 minutes, for an overall average of 48 minutes. Before participating, individuals signed a university-approved consent form, tailored to the needs of the study, to establish ethical clarity and trust (Williams, 2016). At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of the study's purpose, their right to skip questions, and asked again for verbal consent to audio record. Those audio recordings were made simultaneously through my phone and laptop and were securely stored on those devices. Collected data will be securely deleted upon successful completion of the thesis. The questions during the interview centered on the challenges non-binary individuals face when traveling, touching on topics like booking, transport, accommodation, and emotional experiences. Clarifying questions ensured accurate understanding (Sears, 1992). At the end, participants could share additional insights and offer

suggestions for more gender-inclusive travel, positioning them as advisors in the research process. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, when no new insights emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word and manually coded using an inductive approach: emerging themes were grouped into broader categories and analyzed for similarities, differences, and recurring patterns (Babbie, 2012). The findings are presented in clear, accessible language to ensure clarity for both academic and general audiences. This approach directly responds to concerns that queer theory is often inaccessible due to its use of academic jargon (Dilley, 1999; Malinowitz & Fuss, 1993) and reflects the study's commitment to inclusivity and knowledge-sharing beyond the academic world.

5.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Conducting research with non-binary individuals requires careful ethical consideration and preparation due to the sensitive nature. Comprehensive information was therefore provided at each stage of the study. Additionally, empathy, immersion in participants' lived realities, and a commitment to respect and nuanced understanding are crucial in queer studies (Sears, 1992) and thus were key aspects in this study. This approach helped create a safe space for participants to openly share their thoughts and emotions. The informal semi-structured interview format allowed participants to guide the conversation, fostering collaboration and authenticity rather than passive participation (Baines et al., 2013) and allowing them to lead the discussion as experts in their own experiences (Vincent, 2018). Particular attention was given to gender-neutral and inclusive language, as it validates identity and demonstrates respect for trans and non-binary individuals (Transgender Infopunt, n.d.; Vincent, 2018).

Protecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality was another ethical priority (Hoft, 2021). Given the sensitive subject matter and the relatively small size of the Flemish non-binary community, extra care was taken to minimize the risk of identification. Anonymity is maintained in the analysis and reporting, and demographic details are not disclosed. No names or pseudonyms are used in this study, as many participants, along with Transgender Infopunt (2022), report that while it is encouraging that transgender themes are receiving increased academic attention, research fatigue has become prevalent within this community due to frequent participation in multiple studies, often under pseudonyms. Therefore, to minimize the risk of compromising confidentiality across studies and ensure that no content in this paper can be used to trace or identify participants, the use of pseudonyms has been deliberately avoided, thus upholding full confidentiality (Wiles et al., 2008).

Finally, as Sears (1992, p. 149) notes, "before being a researcher, a person is first a member of a particular culture. It is within that culture that the person's view of the world is constructed". As such, in this study, I would position myself as an 'outsider on the inside'. While I identify as cisgender, I have strong personal connections within the LGBTQIA+ community and significant engagement with trans and non-binary identities. Additionally, I share the same language and culture as the participants. Since qualitative research is inherently value-based (Sears, 1992), this dual perspective influences my interpretation of the data through an activist lens, strongly aligned with LGBTQIA+ rights. As a result, other researchers might have reached different themes and conclusions. Lastly, throughout the Findings and Discussion sections, a limited number of participant quotes are included to add richness and depth to the content (Eldh et al., 2020). This deliberate moderation prevents quotations from detracting from the findings (Elo et al., 2014), maintaining a tone that is both serene and impactful while allowing the results to speak for themselves. Following this outlined methodology, the results are presented in the next section.

6. Findings

This section presents the key findings of the research, drawn from the experiences and perspectives shared by participants. The central theme that quickly emerged across all accounts was the dominant influence of heteronormativity and the gender binary. Participants consistently identified these social constructs as the primary sources of stress, discomfort, and frustration throughout their tourism experiences. These challenges manifested across various aspects and stages of travel, which will be discussed below.

6.1   Gender Markers in Documentation and Bookings

The topic of gender markers on identification documents and travel bookings generated the most varied opinions and experiences among participants. When asked whether they supported the availability of an 'X' option, a non-binary gender marker, on their identification documents, 13 out of 14 participants responded positively. They emphasized the significance of official recognition as a form of validation and the importance of providing the option for those who need it. However, when considering whether they would personally choose the 'X' marker, views surprisingly diverged considerably. One participant stated they would change to an 'X' despite potential travel restrictions. Three participants expressed reluctance due to ongoing gender exploration, fear of negative reactions from others, and concerns about personal safety. Interestingly, the majority of participants indicated they would *not* currently

opt for an 'X' marker. Not due to a lack of desire for recognition, but because of the (possible) implications. Their concerns included the lack of international recognition in certain countries, reduced travel freedom, the involuntary disclosure of gender identity, and, most notably, the fear of being treated differently or facing discrimination based on the marker. Additionally, some participants reflected on the possibility of changing their gender marker within the traditional binary framework ('M' to 'F' or vice versa). While many had considered this route, most ultimately decided against it, feeling that it did not fully represent their identity either. Others highlighted the significant administrative burden involved. Even among those who had changed their marker, a sense of misalignment or discomfort often remained due to the limitations of binary categorization. Finally, participants responded with skepticism to Belgium's recent proposal that would allow its citizens to remove the gender marker from their ID upon formal request. They expressed concern that such a system could further marginalize queer individuals by increasing their visibility, as most cisgender individuals would likely retain their gender marker, effectively singling out those who opt to remove it.

When it came to making travel bookings, participants were generally more inclined to select an 'X' or 'other' option when such choices were available. However, many noted that these inclusive options were frequently absent from booking platforms, forcing them to choose a gender category that did not align with their identity, which was a source of frustration and discomfort for many.

Critiques of the 'X' option also emerged. Two participants expressed concern that, while intended to be inclusive, it still reinforces the notion of a separate, third category, which can feel just as limiting as binary options. While two participants were indifferent to the mere presence of a gender marker, the majority (11 out of 14) preferred their complete removal from identification documents and bookings. However, two participants acknowledged that for some transgender individuals, having a gender marker, whether binary or non-binary, can serve as a source of validation and affirmation. This underscores the diversity of needs and preferences within the broader gender-diverse community.

6.2   Navigating Destination Choice, Safety Considerations, and Behavior

In contrast to the gender marker discussion, the choice of destination emerged as a theme where participant responses showed near-unanimous agreement. Participants emphasized the critical importance of thorough research to assess safety, legal protections, social climate, and local attitudes when selecting travel destinations. 13 out of 14 participants stated they

would not visit countries with anti-LGBTQIA+ laws or sentiments. Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the US (since policy shifts under Trump towards binary gender recognition) were all mentioned more than twice as no-go destinations. While safety was the primary concern, several participants also expressed an ethical dimension to their decisions. They preferred not to financially support countries whose governments or societies rejected their existence. In contrast, destinations offering legal protections, such as those where same-sex marriage is legalized, were generally seen as safer, more desirable, and more welcoming.

Beyond the choice of destination as a key aspect to safe traveling, more than half of the participants also described adapting their behavior and appearance as key strategies to ensure safety while traveling. They felt pressured to conform to binary gender roles and to present as "visibly male or female" to avoid negative attention. They reported dressing neutrally or discreetly, particularly when traveling with family members before coming out. Those traveling with accepting partners or friends felt freer to experiment with clothing, makeup, and self-expression, although they always remained vigilant about their surroundings and the potential risks in unfamiliar places. Only a few participants consciously chose authenticity over conformity, viewing vacations as a rare opportunity for true self-expression.

Travel strategies also reflected these safety concerns. Some participants preferred traveling in groups to avoid standing out, while others favored revisiting familiar destinations where they had previously felt safe and comfortable. The presence of trusted companions made a crucial difference for some, allowing participants to feel more at ease and reducing the burden of repeatedly explaining their gender identity. In contrast, when traveling alone or in unfamiliar environments, individuals often felt compelled to hide aspects of their identity or downplay their gender expression to prioritize safety. Lastly, preferences regarding the type of travel environment also came up. Some participants felt safer in urban settings where diversity allowed them to blend in more easily, while others preferred remote, natural locations with fewer people, reducing the likelihood of judgment or harassment. A few participants specifically sought out LGBTQIA+-friendly destinations, hotels, or events abroad, valuing spaces where they could express themselves freely without fear of discrimination.

"I do not want to have to constantly prove myself or explain who I am. As a man or woman, you do not have to explain why you are male or female, it is simply accepted."

6.3   Binary Gender Norms in Interactions and Tourism Spaces

Next to gender markers, destination choice, and safety, participants described a range of challenges related to the widespread presence of binary gender norms in both communication and tourism spaces. The frequent use of gendered titles such as *Mr.* or *Mrs.* in both written and oral interactions was seen as uncomfortable and unnecessary by most participants. While some participants corrected others by stating their preferred name or pronouns, others chose to avoid confrontation, often at the cost of their comfort. Misgendering based on clothing or appearance was common, with participants reporting that their style of dress frequently led to assumptions that placed them within one side of the binary.

Beyond verbal and written communication, binary expectations were also embedded in tourism-related activities. Participants recounted experiences in settings such as dance classes, swimming areas, and formal events where gendered roles and dress codes were strictly enforced. Traditional dance roles such as 'leader' for men and 'follower' for women were highlighted as particularly limiting. Similarly, activities like swimming introduced discomfort around clothing that reinforced gender norms. More than half of the participants reported feelings of anxiety and exposure in gendered swimwear, with some choosing to cover up or avoid swimming altogether to prevent judgment or unwanted attention. For individuals who had undergone or were considering top surgery, the pressure was even greater. Several expressed insecurities about wearing swim trunks or showing their chest due to visible scars, fearing judgment or harassment. Formal settings like galas on cruises further emphasized these constraints, with rigid dress codes serving as ongoing reminders of binary expectations. Across contexts, participants emphasized the importance of being able to dress and express themselves in ways that felt both comfortable and authentic, something often made difficult in gendered environments.

Lastly, airports were identified as particularly challenging spaces, with nearly half reporting significant discomfort and anxiety during security procedures. Body searches and screenings were often described as distressing, especially when participants felt their gender identity did not align with the assumptions made by security personnel. The possibility of being touched or physically searched was especially triggering. Some participants recognized the challenges for security staff, who are required to follow strict guidelines and might not be trained on how to handle gender non-conforming travelers. Participants also reported confusion among airport staff, as security personnel sometimes did not know what sex to select when it came to them going through the security machines. An additional source of stress arises for some participants who use prosthetics such as penile or breast forms. This increased the fear of

being flagged during scans, having to get body searched, and getting into trouble because of using these prosthetics or carrying them in their luggage.

6.4 Emotional and Mental Toll of Navigating Gender Identity in Daily Life and Travel

By now, it has become clear that navigating gender identity in both everyday life and while traveling comes with an emotional toll. For many, the pressure to conform to societal expectations of heteronormativity and binary gender categorizations, as well as the absence of understanding and respect for diverse gender identities, is a consistent source of discomfort, stress, feelings of unacceptance or being unwanted, and not belonging. The strain of having to explain their gender identity to others was described as exhausting and mentally draining. This was especially evident in gendered spaces like changing rooms and bathrooms, where the lack of gender-neutral options forces individuals to choose between two boxes that do not align with their identity, which sometimes led to being denied access to certain bathrooms. Furthermore, many participants have faced verbal abuse, excessive staring, and mocking. These experiences often led them to feel unsafe or uncomfortable, both while traveling in Belgium and abroad. While some described it as being worse while abroad, others described it as being worse in Belgium. For those traveling with a partner, the experience of being stared at or verbally attacked seemed even more intense, leading to feelings of vulnerability.

These experiences often make it difficult for individuals to fully express their authentic selves. The constant vigilance required to navigate potential threats, aggression, or simply the inability to be true to their identity contributed to an ongoing sense of discomfort. Some participants described becoming emotionally conditioned to suppress their reactions to these systematic challenges, as confronting others often felt emotionally draining, unproductive, and unsafe. That fear sometimes leads individuals to avoid certain locations or engage in extensive mental preparation about how to act to ensure safety. This sense of constantly having to be on guard is a significant mental burden. Alarmingly, some labeled these issues as "not real problems" because they were not physically attacked, or that it could be much worse, downplaying their feelings and systematic discrimination. Lastly, several participants shared the profound impact of loss, such as the death due to suicide of transgender friends who had struggled with similar battles in a heteronormative society, and the emotional toll that comes with not being able to help someone.

6.5 The Interplay of Gender Identity and Gender Expression in Non-Binary Travel Experiences and Motivations

While largely outside the scope of this study, it is important to raise awareness about the theme of gender identity versus gender expression, as there was an unexpected, yet clear interplay between how participants expressed their gender on the one hand and the experiences and challenges they faced on the other hand. The relationship between gender identity and gender expression, along with the balance between authenticity and societal expectations, created a complex dynamic and proved to be a crucial factor in how non-binary individuals experience travel. Those whose gender expression aligned more closely with binary norms in daily life, such as people who were not 'out' yet, tended to continue this 'neutrality' while traveling to avoid confrontation, discrimination, and fear of being outed. For these individuals, often the priority was being able to travel and experience new places, rather than being able to express their true gender identity. On the other hand, non-binary individuals whose gender expression more closely matched their gender identity, or who were "flamboyantly" gender expressive, as they called it, were often less fearful and felt more confident traveling as their authentic selves. These individuals were generally less likely to alter their behavior or appearance to conform to binary expectations, as doing so would make them feel uncomfortable and inauthentic. For them, the ability to be themselves while traveling was more important than the experience of traveling itself. However, presenting in a more "flamboyant" manner also generally led to more harassment. In addition, individuals who had undergone gender-affirming procedures often also faced more problems, including more harassment and misgendering. In contrast, individuals who expressed themselves in a more traditionally masculine or feminine way and therefore 'passed' as cisgender generally experienced fewer such issues and were less likely to correct others when being misgendered or addressed with the wrong pronouns. Similarly, queer couples who were perceived as heterosexual generally faced fewer challenges, harassment, and discrimination.

"I hope one day I will dare to take the step to be myself."

7. Discussion: The Need for Change

7.1 The Intersection of Queer Theory and Non-binary Travel Experiences

The previously highlighted findings underscore a central insight from Sedgwick (1990): there is no singular non-binary traveler, nor a single narrative that defines their experiences. Instead, multiple voices and realities emerged, reinforcing Butler's (1990) notion of gender as performative and fluid. The intersection of Queer Theory, queer tourism studies, and the lived realities of marginalized gender identities reveals both the challenges and opportunities within the tourism sector for queer and non-binary travelers, with at the heart the critique of heteronormative structures that shape various societal domains, including tourism. Drawing from Queer Theory, this binary system, as Cameron and Stinson (2019) and Kendall (2024) assert, marginalizes gender non-conforming and non-binary individuals, framing them as anomalies rather than integral components of human diversity. Empirical studies, including those by Cuklanz and Erol (2020) and Olson and Reddy-Best (2019), reinforce this critique by showing that the tourism industry's reliance on gender binaries poses significant barriers for transgender and non-binary travelers, while demonstrating how the tourism industry reinforces gender conformity at the expense of inclusivity.

Findings from this study echo this, with participants consistently reporting the emotional and physical labor of navigating tourism spaces that assume gender conformity. Whether in airport security, identification documents, destination choice, activities, or bathrooms, participants frequently encountered challenges related to the misalignment between their gender identity and the gendered expectations of the tourism industry and society in general. Both the literature and empirical findings point to the vital role of authorities, the tourism industry, and businesses in creating more inclusive environments and addressing these systemic barriers. In the end, participants just want to be able to be who they are, not who society wants them to be, tying back to Butler's (1990) call for self-identification. The following section integrates theoretical insights from the literature with empirical findings from the interviews, highlighting the urgent need for change in an industry still structured by heteronormative and binary gender norms (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016; Malinowitz & Fuss, 1993; Manning & Adams, 2021).

7.2 The Importance of Inclusion and Visibility

A central concern highlighted by both the existing literature and the findings of this study is the ongoing issue of safety and discrimination faced by transgender and non-binary individuals in tourism spaces (Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019; Uitterlinden, 2019). These barriers often discourage them from traveling altogether or force them to adopt coping strategies such as concealing their identities or avoiding certain destinations (Bockting et al., 2013; Motmans et al., 2017; Stonewall, 2018), which leads to heightened anxiety and depression (Bockting et al., 2013). Many participants in this study echoed these findings, sharing experiences of harassment, fear, and discomfort in public spaces. However, such experiences were not limited to international travel. While Belgium is generally regarded as progressive in terms of LGBTQIA+ rights and consistently ranks high in LGBTQIA+ travel friendliness, placing 12th worldwide for 2025 (Spartacus Travel Index, 2025), participants noted that the country's legal protections and safety measures were still imperfect. Some participants even reported that harassment was more pronounced in Belgium than abroad, indicating the need for continued progress in countries considered 'LGBTQIA+ friendly' and underscoring how most tourism environments fail to meet the needs of gender-diverse individuals. Participants, just like Motmans et al. (2017), emphasized that these gaps in inclusion are not minor inconveniences but sources of persistent stress and anxiety, demonstrating the critical need for accessible, inclusive, and safe travel environments.

The importance of visibility and inclusion is a central theme highlighted by interviewees in addressing these barriers (Puar, 2002; Waitt, 2011). Participants reported significantly more positive and affirming experiences when tourism providers adopted inclusive practices, such as offering gender-neutral facilities and training staff in LGBTQIA+ awareness, echoing findings by Felten and Broekroelofs (2020) and Movisie (2023). Notably, interviewees emphasized that impactful change does not always require large-scale interventions; small, intentional adjustments can meaningfully enhance feelings of safety, comfort, and well-being. One specific example frequently cited was the need for gender-neutral bathrooms. Nearly all participants expressed a strong desire for such facilities, while the few who did not see them as strictly necessary still acknowledged they would feel more comfortable if they were available. Many questioned the logic behind gender-segregated restrooms, noting that private homes do not make such distinctions, linking back to the issue of binary constructed societies (Jagose, 1996). Several participants described the emotional labor of assessing how others might perceive their gender before choosing a bathroom, with some opting for accessible toilets as a safer alternative. Moreover, accounts of harassment, confrontations, and even removal by security staff were not uncommon. For many, gender-neutral bathrooms were

viewed as a simple yet vital and highly impactful step toward ensuring dignity, safety, and inclusion. This echoes findings from Community Marketing and Insights (2019), who reported that 94% of non-binary individuals view establishments more positively when such facilities are available, and from Chaney and Sanchez (2017), who emphasized the role of gender-neutral bathrooms in fostering safety and inclusion.

Another practical step that came up during interviews is the consistent use of pronouns and gender-inclusive language in both spoken and written communication; something that is echoed by many scholars and organizations (e.g., Herjanto et al., 2023; Movisie, 2023; Transgender Infopunt, n.d.). Simple changes, like saying "Welcome" instead of "Welcome Sir/Madam" or including pronouns in client communications, were described by participants as small but powerful gestures that signaled recognition and respect. Normalizing such practices was seen as key to improving visibility and inclusion for queer travelers. However, this shift requires proper training and genuine commitment from tourism staff, highlighting the need to move beyond one-size-fits-all models and adopt strategies that reflect the diversity within the LGBTQIA+ community (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020).

That said, small-scale measures alone cannot address the deeper issue of structural heteronormativity (Sedgwick, 1990). Participants acknowledged, in line with Sedgwick (1990), that binary gender norms are deeply embedded in cultural discourse and power structures, making them difficult to dismantle. However, systemic change is essential for building a truly inclusive society, as emphasized by De Lauretis (1991), Halperin (2003), and echoed by interviewees. Most participants identified visibility, awareness, and education around gender diversity and LGBTQIA+ issues as foundational to broader societal transformation. Only through such efforts can tourism become a genuinely inclusive space where non-binary individuals feel a sense of belonging (Vijlbrief et al., 2019) and can live 'normally' (Oswin, 2008). This is especially important because interviewees noted a widespread lack of understanding, which fosters distance and reinforces exclusion. This reflects broader critiques, including Jagose's (1996) critique of the limited engagement with postmodern understandings of gender and sexuality, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights' (2014) findings on the public's poor understanding of trans identities, and Olson and Reddy-Best's (2019) critique of the tourism industry's lack of awareness and implementation of inclusive practices. Olson and Reddy-Best (2019) cite TSA regulations as a key example, an issue that participants also repeatedly described as particularly distressing, especially when using prosthetics, as Uitterlinden (2019) also observed.

7.2.1 Gender Expression

Building on the previous point of visibility and inclusion, participants' reflections also revealed how gender expression plays a critical role in shaping travel experiences. The more visibly gender non-conforming they were, the more likely they were to encounter discomfort, scrutiny, or discrimination. This highlights the persistent societal pressure to conform to binary gender norms in public spaces, particularly within the tourism industry, where visibility often increases vulnerability, and places like pools or locker rooms become sites of avoidance rather than inclusion (Oakleaf & Richmond, 2017).

This contrast between the experiences of gender-expressive individuals and those perceived as more gender-conforming reinforces findings by Bockting et al. (2013), Motmans et al. (2017), and Vijlbrief et al. (2019), who found that many non-binary individuals restrict their gender expression due to fear of harassment. These dynamics involve modifying clothing, behavior, or verbal self-identification to navigate tourism spaces more safely (Oakleaf & Richmond, 2017), a pattern echoed by many participants. Several interviewees stressed that this pressure to 'pass' as cisgender is not a personal preference but a protective strategy. This reflects a broader cultural context where full authenticity is often sacrificed to avoid harm (Kennis et al., 2022). Consequently, increased visibility, awareness, and education remain crucial. As societal understanding grows, non-binary and gender-diverse travelers may feel more empowered to express themselves, whether by using a non-binary gender marker, correcting misgendering, or dressing in line with their identity without fear.

7.3 Gender Markers, Recognition, and the Limits of Inclusion

Diving deeper into issues of visibility and inclusion, the experiences of participants in this study reflect and complicate existing theoretical discussions surrounding gender markers on identity documents. As highlighted previously, the availability of accurate gender markers, particularly a non-binary 'X' option, and legal recognition for gender-diverse individuals, is linked to improved mental health outcomes (Bauer et al., 2015; NYCLU, 2024). 13 out of 14 participants supported the inclusion of an 'X' marker in principle, recognizing its symbolic and institutional value. However, the findings also reveal the limitations of such measures in practice. Most participants would not personally select the 'X' marker due to the potential for international travel restrictions, exposure to discrimination, and the unintended consequence of increased visibility in unsafe contexts. This aligns with existing critiques that the 'X' marker, while

intended to be inclusive, can inadvertently reinforce otherness or act as a marker of vulnerability (Cameron & Stinson, 2019; T'Sjoen et al., 2021).

Belgium's current lack of an 'X' option, even with the Belgian 2018 Transgender Law stating that everyone must be able to be registered according to their gender identity (Verberckmoes 2022), stands in contrast to growing international recognition of the need for inclusive documentation. However, while countries like the Netherlands have adopted the 'X' marker, administrative and financial obstacles persist (Palm, 2023), limiting access and demonstrating that legal options alone are insufficient. This resonates with participants' critiques of Belgium's proposed 2025 reform, which was mentioned previously. As Ashley (2021) and Cannoot (2021) argue, the mere removal or addition of categories does not automatically result in meaningful inclusion unless legal reforms are co-developed with the communities they aim to serve. Furthermore, participants raised important concerns about the practical limitations of the 'X' category. Several noted that it risks becoming a rigid third box rather than dismantling the gender binary altogether, a concern echoed in Ashley's (2021) and Monro's (2019) theoretical critiques.

Overall, these findings underscore a central tension: while official recognition through gender markers can be affirming, it can also expose individuals to risk and reinforce exclusionary structures. The diversity of perspectives among participants, ranging from those who seek validation through a gender marker to those who prefer their complete removal for everyone, highlights the need for flexible, user-led solutions that do not assume uniform needs within gender-diverse communities (Ashley, 2021; Cannoot, 2021; Movisie, 2023). Legal reforms in Belgium and beyond must therefore be designed not only to provide more options but also to dismantle the binary logics and administrative burdens that limit self-determination; a crucial point in queer theory, as stated by Butler (1990).

"Feeling safe in my own country would already be a big step forward."

7.4   The Need for (Clear) Information

Inclusivity, visibility, and recognition undeniably also come with the need for access to clear and accurate information. As previously noted, a consistent theme among participants was the deliberate choice of queer-friendly destinations and the extensive research required to ensure safety while traveling. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the importance of accessible, transparent information on a destination's laws and attitudes toward LGBTQIA+

travelers (Herjanto et al., 2023; Hughes, 2002). Participants expressed a clear preference for destinations and accommodations with explicit anti-discrimination policies and visible commitments to LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, reflecting findings by Community Marketing and Insights (2019). They also considered whether local authorities would offer protection if needed, as highlighted by Olson and Reddy-Best (2019), and avoided destinations where LGBTQIA+ communities face mistreatment, consistent with findings by Community Marketing and Insights (2019). These preferences reflect broader research showing that queer and non-binary travelers prioritize environments where they feel safe, accepted, and free to express their identities (Community Marketing & Insights, 2019; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2015). For tourism providers, this underscores the need to adopt inclusive policies not only to attract LGBTQIA+ travelers but to create genuinely welcoming spaces, as, just like the interviewees stated, studies (e.g., Beentjes, 2019; Herjanto et al., 2023; Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019; Uitterlinden, 2019) show that many non-binary individuals fear their identity may negatively affect the service they receive, forcing some back into the closet or more gender-binary spaces. Interviewees acknowledged that while specific queer-safe spaces *should* ideally be unnecessary, as Oswin (2008) argues, such spaces remain crucial as long as queer people are marginalized.

To address these concerns, several tools already exist to help LGBTQIA+ travelers make informed decisions about the safety and inclusivity of potential destinations. Resources like the Spartacus International Gay Guide and the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) provide valuable guidance on legal protections, societal attitudes, and local regulations. These tools consider critical factors such as same-sex marriage laws, the death penalty, and gender recognition legislation, enabling travelers to evaluate the relative safety of various locations. However, many participants in this study were unaware of such resources, revealing a gap in awareness and access. Instead, most stayed informed through media coverage and asking Google their questions. For example, widespread reporting in Flemish media on the denial of transgender and non-binary identities in the US, said to pose serious risks for queer travelers (Lecluyse, 2025), played a crucial role in informing participants' perceptions of and decisions about travel safety to the US. This also points to an opportunity for specialized travel consultants or agencies knowledgeable about global LGBTQIA+ issues and legislation. Participants emphasized that such services would be especially helpful when traveling to unfamiliar countries, making the experience more comfortable and less stressful. Several also proposed that dedicated organizations could arrange queer group trips, offering not only safety and acceptance but also a chance to connect with other queer travelers and enjoy a more affirming travel experience.

7.5 The "Pink Economy" and the Commodification of Queer Identities

Finally, we turn to a deeper examination of what was introduced in the section above: the queer tourism industry, often referred to as the "pink economy" (Waitt et al., 2008). As outlined in existing literature, the tourism sector frequently homogenizes LGBTQIA+ travelers, largely catering to a narrow demographic: affluent, white, gay men (Puar, 2002; Waitt et al., 2008). This marketing focus reinforces a narrow view of the queer community and overlooks the distinct needs of identities such non-binary individuals. Sedgwick (1990) reminds us that queer identities are complex and varied, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive spaces that reflect this diversity. Findings from this study support these critiques: participants voiced a strong desire for tourism environments that go beyond stereotypical representations of queer travelers and affirm a broader spectrum of gender identities. Many expressed feeling invisible or excluded due to the persistent prioritization of gay male narratives in tourism research and industry practice, an issue also raised by Manning and Adams (2021), Puar (2002), and Waitt (2011).

An additional issue, emerging unexpectedly in interviews, was the concern over 'pinkwashing,' where businesses use LGBTQIA+ symbols or messaging, for example during Pride month, as a marketing tactic for profit, while ignoring ongoing issues of discrimination and inequality (Blackmer, 2019). Participants criticized practices such as removing Pride symbols after Pride Month, interpreting its temporary use as performative and insincere gestures that commodify queer identities and downplay LGBTQIA+ struggles rather than showing year-round and true support. On the other hand, some participants appreciated visible labels like 'LGBTQIA+ friendly' at venues (both online and physically), such as hotels and restaurants, which signaled safety and acceptance. However, others remained skeptical, echoing Waitt's (2011) warning that such branding can also serve more as a promotional strategy than a sign of real inclusivity.

These findings point to the need for a queer tourism model that moves beyond tokenistic marketing and meaningfully reflects the diverse realities of LGBTQIA+ travelers. The industry must move toward deeper engagement, creating spaces where all queer and non-binary individuals feel safe, respected and valued.

"You cannot expect everyone to have the same worldview, but openness to learning and respect would already mean a lot."

8. Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of Flemish non-binary travelers, shedding light on the persistent challenges they face as a result of deeply embedded gender binaries and heteronormative structures that continue to shape travel spaces. In response to our research question, "*What Challenges do Flemish Non-Binary Individuals Encounter in Participating in Tourism?",* the findings reveal that non-binary individuals frequently encounter discrimination, safety concerns, and a lack of inclusive services, particularly concerning documentation mismatches, gendered facilities and communication, and limited access to LGBTQIA+-friendly destinations. These insights underscore the urgent need for the tourism industry, and society more broadly, to move beyond the gender binary framework, increase the visibility and understanding of gender-diverse communities such as non-binary individuals, and to adopt meaningful, systemic changes that accommodate diverse gender identities. Participants underscored the importance of creating safe, welcoming spaces through inclusive staff training, gender-neutral facilities, services, and communication, and a genuine commitment to inclusivity, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and welcoming travel landscape for all.

8.1   Limitations

Every study comes with inherent limitations, and this research is no exception. Several factors may have influenced the findings, and it is important to acknowledge these limitations to contextualize the results.

As the sole analyst of the data, my personal bias inevitably influenced the research and analysis process. Given my positionality (see *5.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality*), it is possible that I subconsciously emphasized certain themes or interpretations that aligned with my expectations or assumptions, which may have impacted the objectivity of the analysis.

Secondly, this study was conducted within the context of Flanders, meaning that the findings are reflective of the experiences of Flemish citizens only. As a result, the conclusions cannot be generalized to the broader Belgian population. Additionally, the study sample was not ethnically diverse, as it consisted solely of white participants. This lack of diversity overlooks potential cultural variations in the topics explored. Moreover, the research did not account for factors such as education or social class, which introduces a lack of intersectionality. By not considering how these aspects might influence participants' experiences, the study misses an opportunity to capture a fuller, more nuanced perspective. However, time constraints and the limited scope of the study made it unfeasible to include this dimension.

The study also relied on participants with internet access and familiarity with video call platforms, resulting in the exclusion of individuals without digital access or confidence in using such tools. This limitation may have contributed to the skewed age distribution, with a higher proportion of younger participants and none aged 65 or over. As a result, the experiences and perspectives of older individuals were underrepresented, potentially influencing the overall findings.

8.2 Future research

In light of the limitations discussed, a key priority in future research is recruiting a more diverse sample that includes participants from varied ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Investigating intersectional factors such as education, class, and ethnicity would deepen understandings of non-binary experiences.

Additionally, I believe that future research could benefit greatly from further examining how variations in gender expression shape the experiences of individuals within the non-binary community. A more nuanced understanding of these expressions could offer critical insights into how non-binary people navigate societal expectations, construct personal identity, and, potentially, feel compelled to conform to normative gender roles or adopt specific modes of self-presentation.

Moreover, comparative research involving countries with third-gender markers, like the Netherlands, could shed light on the global implications of legal recognition. Exploring how non-binary individuals experience these markers, especially when traveling to countries that do not acknowledge them, would offer valuable insights into the challenges and experiences in tourism connected to legal and social recognition of 'X' gender markers.

These potential research avenues would further enrich our understanding of non-binary experiences and help to shape more inclusive policies and practices both locally and globally. Ultimately, creating more inclusive spaces requires a commitment to recognizing the full spectrum of gender identities, ensuring that non-binary individuals can travel safely and authentically, free from discrimination and exclusion.

"I want to be able to be who I want to be, not who the world wants me to be."

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