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# The Gendered Masks We Wear So Well: The Issues of Being LGBT or Non-Binary in High School

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The Gendered Masks We Wear So Well: The Issues of Being LGBT or Non-Binary in High  
School

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## The Gendered Masks We Wear So Well: The Issues of Being LGBT or Non-Binary in High School

By examining theories, doing a review of the literature, and providing arguments, the contents of this paper analyze multiple aspects of the modern binary gender system in high school, as well as teenage sexuality performances. This paper brings together research involving different schools from different areas, and explains why and how LGBT and gender non-binary students are oppressed in classes, by the curriculum, and in socialization between students. If these schools are more open with their student population about the prevalence and existence of LGBT and gender non-binary students, then schools will be better equipped to provide support, and create non-discriminatory policies. The research provides insight into the ways students and the school system reinforce the binary gender system, which consistently pressures non-conforming students into the heteronormative standards. Further research should be done because of the current climate of this topic and the lack of quantitative research on non-binary school students.

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## The Gendered Masks We Wear So Well: The Issues of Being LGBT or Non-Binary in High School

### **Introduction**

The gender system is a complex social spectrum which connects an individual to how they portray themselves in daily life. Individuals can present themselves as more masculine or more feminine depending on how they identify, whether that is male, female, or somewhere in between. In high schools, students and faculty monitor heteronormative gender practices. Students need to conform to gender role expectations to avoid being bullied, harassed, or ostracized by their peers. Heterosexual and LGBT+ high school students experience social pressures to conform to the binary gender system; these pressures contribute to various social anxieties and reaffirm the established gender norms of adolescent men and women.

### **Literature Review**

The articles I examine in this literature review address many theories accounting for various explanations of heteronormative culture among high school students. The theories help explain how physical education classes promote a hegemonic masculine culture, how sexuality is depicted in high school interactions, and the struggles LGBT youth face when they do not conform to the established gender norms. By examining a plethora of sociological theories, I explain how the modern binary gender system operates in the high school environment, the performance of teenage sexuality, and how the ideas of hegemonic masculinity are universal in both.

Hegemony describes the power differences between the two binary gender classes, men and women. The United States has been and continues to be a primarily patriarchal society, and the idea of a man performing to a specific standard that met patriarchal requirements became

normalized. The patriarchal society, along with a man's role to fulfill social requirements, creates an imbalance of power among men and women (Connell, Messerschmidt, 831-832). Even though modern society may be less patriarchal, the concept of men performing a certain set of roles has continued to permeate through history, and a form of hegemonic masculinity exists and changes throughout time. R.W. Connell (2005) formulates that hegemonic masculinity, "...embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (2005:832). Connell (2005) recognizes the concept of changes in hegemonic behavior according to the modern standards of masculine roles, and this is an international phenomenon. Since gender roles vary between countries, hegemony becomes a fluid concept that will change over time and is specific to each culture.

The first of the three main theories that appears often in existing literature is R.W. Connell's gender order theory. Both Allen and Burns (2013, 2014) analyze Connell's (1982) ideas on hegemonic masculinity as it operates within the gender order theory. Allen's (2013) methodology consists of having high school students photograph incidences in which boys behave in a stereotypically masculine way among their peers. After having the photos developed, Allen conducted personal interviews with students to ask how they interpreted the action captured in the photograph. Allen (2013) describes hegemonic masculinity as, "... not a fixed character type... This hierarchy of masculinities establishes relations of dominance, subordination, and alliance that are played out between men... some forms are socially rewarded... others are marginalized..." (351). Burns (2014) directly cites Connell stating, "hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power" (7). Both researchers establish hegemony as a fluid concept that depends

on society and the ability of its culture to form a power imbalance among genders. Burn's (2014) work examines how boys who are marginalized through hegemony are affected socially. The social effect is ostracization from the majority of males who perform well in gym class. By performing field observations in physical education classes, he discovers how being physically fit is a key component in the imbalance of power among men and dominance. Physical education class is a breeding ground for men to show off physicality, and in such classes, males compete for a platform to signify their athleticism. Through interviews, Burns (2014) demonstrates hegemony as a rigid concept into which men fit or risk marginalization. Burns (2014) concludes the performance of males in gym class will directly impact how they are perceived by other males, and athletic ability is created by the desire among males to be dominant. Allen's (2013) research highlights hegemony as a whole in the school environment and how it is portrayed among young men. The visual photograph diary she uses to analyze data is extremely effective when studying the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity and examining how high school boys try to socially empower themselves through performing hegemonic roles. The most effective point connecting Allen's (2013) work to hegemony is the idea of women being photographed for the same study for the same purpose, which emphasizes the presence of a sexual double standard. A double standard is the application of two different reasons towards similar situations or actions. The double standard in Allen's (2013) work I analyze is based on sexuality and gender norms. If students were to go around and capture women practicing sexuality, and the girls were doing all of the same things the boys were doing, they would not be seen as powerful, they would likely be seen as sluts. The presence of a double standard is evident because the boys would be praised by their male heterosexual peers for the same actions that would cause a girl to be called a whore. This connects to hegemony by showing the imbalance of power among genders; how different

genders are 'supposed' to act based on today's culture, and marginalization occurs when gendered social norms are not maintained.

A second theory frequently appearing in the literature on heteronormative culture in high school is queer theory. Kocsis (2017) describes queer theory as a concept dismantling sexuality and gender beyond the gender binary, while also breaking down established hetero-normative concepts (36-37). She uses these ideas to show how health classes in high school are nearsighted when acknowledging non-heteronormative gender and sexuality. She relates the ideas of unboxing heteronormative gender and sexuality categories to which young people are supposed to conform, and how queer theory can diversify current high school health education programs. By breaking apart heteronormative roles, Kocsis (2017) tries to signify where the program excludes anyone who does not fit the heteronormative standards. For example, she analyzes the health program's exclusivity of sexual behavior for LGBT+ students. Through interviews with LGBT+ students, she concludes most sexual education programs only include materials and resources for heterosexual individuals. This presents a major issue because LGBT+ and non binary school students are not provided with information to help them learn about sexual behavior, sexual identity, and how to have safe sex. Kocsis' (2017) work included data from a national 2013 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network survey about the use of the internet to obtain information about sexual health. The survey found 81 percent of LGBT youth went on the internet for health information compared to 46 percent of non-LGBT youth; 62 percent of LGBT youth looked up information on sexuality compared to 12 percent of non-LGBT youth; and 19 percent of LGBT youth searched for information on sexually transmitted infections compared to five percent of non-LGBT youth. The results from the survey conclude LGBT students are not getting as much information as they should be from their health education



classes. De Jong (2014) uses the concepts of queer theory to analyze how high school social workers are able to assist genderqueer students (869). The research shows these social workers had various responses about the bullying and victimization involving LGBT students. Some social workers felt their school ignores bringing LGBT awareness to the school because it will not benefit the school; others felt it would increase bullying and harm the LGBT student population. Specifically, the subjects explained how the school system does not really work to teach kids about gender queerness, and the social workers have a more difficult time explaining the concept to students. Both authors use queer theory to respond to the educational institutions' lack of ability to discuss gender queerness effectively and how gender and sexuality are more complicated than just a binary system.

Similar to the research done by Kocsis and De Jong, Woolley (2016) has done research in the school system, and uses queer theory to explain social practices upholding the gender binary and heteronormativity. She uses a plethora of methods for gathering and analyzing her data, which include, "... participant-observation, individual and focus group interviews, audio and video recordings, photography, questionnaires, and the collection of artefacts..." (88). Woolley (2016) briefly examines the concept of using expressions such as "that's so gay", and the ways in which such phrases reaffirm established gender norms and reproduce heteronormative culture in high school. Her main focus in this research is the students' performances of gender and sexuality. Gender performance is the way one presents themselves based on their ascribed gender. Gender performance affects one's daily social interactions, and the behavior society deems appropriate for one's gender. Sexuality performance is the way one acts based on their individual sexuality. Society accepts heterosexual performance, and sexuality performance is unique between the binary genders. Gender and sexuality performance are closely related

because of heteronormative approval in society. Males have a specific sexuality performance, and females have a specific sexuality performance. Woolley (2016) breaks down practices that create gender lines in high school, and address the role of safe spaces for LGBTQ students. Queer theory is integrated into Woolley's research because she interprets the school as an establishment that recreates heteronormativity. Heteronormativity re-creation is a process in which an entity tries to reaffirm another entity's heteronormative culture through social, visual, and auditory phenomenon. Through interviews with LGBT+ students, Woolley is able to establish the significance of the heteronormative practices in the school. An example of this involves the use of gender as a segregation mechanism throughout high school, including gender segregated bathrooms and gender segregation in school sports.

Queer theory also involves how gender is performed, which is something Wyss (2004) uses to analyze her research. Gender performance is the way individuals perform the roles to which they are ascribed on their established gender in the binary. Wyss (2014) studies how transgender high school students have negative experiences in school because of their lack of conformity to ascribed gender roles. The author's interviews with the high schoolers showed a relationship between the students' gender queerness, and the physical, sexual, and verbal violence they experience (716-719). By doing gender and avoiding confrontation, Wyss discovered transgender students were sometimes able to fit in and not be targeted by their peers. This study deduces the concepts of queer theory have not been integrated into high school, and conforming to heteronormative expectations is still seen as important for all students.

Pascoe (2005) uses queer theory to identify the practices of gay name-calling and homosexual identities some heterosexual males place on their peers. She examines queer theory to explain socialization and behavior of heterosexual, high school males. Pascoe (2005) conducts

50 formal interviews with students, and a large number of informal interviews with students and staff members to find patterns of behavior among male students that teachers and students both acknowledge. Queer theory ties into the author's work because her work signifies the concept that heterosexual males call their peers fags in order to show a clear disapproval, and by doing so, demeans homosexuality. This also reaffirms gender norms by temporarily labeling boys as fags, which makes it clear as to what behavior is seen as acceptable or unacceptable, and identifies how far men skew from what is seen as hegemonic before being temporarily ousted by their male, heterosexual peers.

The third main theory often employed to explain gender and sexuality inequalities is feminist theory, which Kocsis (2017) describes as, "...a method of examining power structures and oppressive societal constraints" (2017:31). Queer theory differs from feminist theory because the former focuses on explaining the wide variance of genders and sexualities, whereas the latter examines the inequality among established and accepted genders in society. Kocsis (2017) uses feminist theory to analyze students and their individual sexualities, along with their ability to make choices about reproduction as adults. The author analyzes the content of modern health education courses on sexual activity and its purposes, and how they reflect the ideas of heteronormative males and females. For example, Kocsis (2017) finds schools use two main types of sexual education, an abstinence only track or a safe sex track. An abstinence only track simply tells individuals not to have sex while the safe sex course teaches students about the importance of safe sex and the significance of using protection. The latter does not elaborate past the usage of condoms, and ignores alternative methods for protection, which makes it harder for LGBT students to understand the resources they have for safe sex. Since the safe sex curriculum teaches students the primary purpose of sex is to procreate, a process in which females play a

submissive role, such an education promotes the idea that females having sex for enjoyment is impure. Kocsis (2017) relates the ideas of social constraints existing in health education classes to feminist theory because of the evident inequality that exists between men and women. Specifically, the author breaks down health education program's focus on intercourse, and the way sexuality is taught in programs. By perpetuating the ways females are 'supposed' to perform sexually, health education in high school recreates an inequality between genders. Because of how the curriculum teaches males to play an active role, and teaches females to play a submissive role, the sexualized practices are assimilated into other aspects of life, and the sexual inequalities turn into gender inequalities. Rahimi (2009) also uses feminist theory to explore ways in which adolescent high school girls perform sexuality. The author's interviews with educators show how women face different societal pressures to appear either as a sexual human being or to hide that sexuality. Rahimi (2009) found men are still not held responsible for their own sexuality, and they can get away with certain actions girls cannot (523), such as wearing certain revealing clothing and expressing sexual desire. The teachers interviewed recognized girls would be called sluts and whores for overperforming sexuality, and men are viewed as normal for the same sexuality performance. This viewpoint punishes girls because of society's expectations to control male sexuality, and by doing so, the females are supposed to suppress their own sexuality. The teachers explain this inequality as a double standard, in which women are punished for performing sexuality because of their inability to restrain male sexual desire, which females are supposed to control by underperforming their own sexuality. This research analyzes the more oppressive societal constraints on women as they are held to stricter standards in terms of expressing sexuality, and are kept to a double standard.

Throughout existing literature on the binary gender system, it is evident physical education and health education classes promote this binary, and students and the school system heavily monitor gender role performance of the students. Burns (2014) analyzes the extent that heterosexual men try to perfect their body image through performance in gym class. Male students tend to show off to hide emotional vulnerabilities that may be perceived by other men for not acting tough in situations outside of class. Male students show off to hide emotional vulnerabilities and be perceived by other men as strong. The masculine hierarchy that exists through competitiveness in physical education excludes men who are not perceived as having a particular body image (10-12). Kocsis (2017) analyzes health education curriculums and how they create specific gender and sexual expectations for each ascribed binary gender. The author finds men are perceived on one extreme end of the sexual spectrum, and women are held to the other extreme end of the sexual spectrum. Men and women are given specific sets of roles to perform as they go through adolescence, and the school system instills these roles in a way that makes them long-lasting. The health education classes also focus on health and resources for only heterosexual males and females (31-36). Even though these authors focus their research on two different classes, they come to a similar conclusion: one group of people is left out. Burns and Kocsis (2014 and 2017) understood that in classes directly involving the performance of gender or sexuality, students who do not conform to established gender and sexuality norms are excluded or bullied. In physical education classes, gay males might not show off to their peers, or they may be excluded entirely from activities because their peers do not want them to participate (13-14). In health class, the curriculum does not include discussions of LGBT sexuality and gender, and therefore, the LGBT students do not have the proper information or resources heterosexual students receive in health class (150-152). Whether intentional or

unintentional, the high school curriculum focuses on the established binary gender system, which makes it more challenging for LGBT students to succeed.

Another main concept about the perpetuation of the binary gender system in high school highlighted through the literature is the performance of sexuality by men and women. Allen (2013) emphasizes how boys perform their gender roles in high school, whereas Rahimi (2009) focuses on how girls fulfill their roles. Allen (2013) concludes men perform certain actions to express they are comfortable with their heterosexuality, which include dressing in certain ways and talking about their sexual encounters. These actions are also performed so males can demonstrate they fit the established norms of heteronormativity (361). Rahimi (2009) determines girls are quiet about their sexual activity, and dress a certain way depending on how comfortable the girls are with their heterosexuality. When comparing both of these articles, it is clear the double standard still exists between men and women (523). When guys discuss their sexual habits, they are praised by other male peers or seen as more masculine; women who talk about sexual activity are seen as sluts, whores, or easy. Through both articles, it is easy to see how men are not punished for acting as a sexual being whereas women are held accountable for when men try to act sexually around women. The hetero-normative expectations upheld by the binary gender system create a sexual double standard that directly affects high school students.

Another focus in the literature is the process by which male students demean other male students who violate traditional gender norms. In the Woolley (2016) article, her interviews led to the conclusion that individuals who do not conform to gender or sexuality norms must deal with microaggressions throughout the school day. These micro aggressions include all of the threats and slurs LGBT people tolerate while in school. Actions such as verbal threats, glances, or unintentional behaviors creating a negative environment are examples of microaggressions.

Woolley (2016) argues that from an outside perspective, it is difficult to detect and fix these issues because of the challenges of changing heteronormative behaviors in the entire school population. Controlling the use of microaggressions is difficult in the school system because these behaviors are usually short and tend not to cause social disruption. She also argues they cannot be fixed simply because students use language to make it clear when their peers violate a gender norm. Since heteronormative students use microaggressions as social control, and this behavior has not been significantly condemned by the school system, changing this is not going to happen easily. Through interviews, Pascoe (2005) establishes a distinction between heteronormative students' use of the word "fag" and the sexual orientation of all students. Through a formal interview, she concludes, "In other words there is a possibility, however slight, that a boy can be gay and masculine. To be a fag is, by definition, the opposite of masculine..."(337). Pascoe deduces sexual orientation as irrelevant in the use of "fag", and male gender performance is what determines if heteronormative peers name call. If someone is gay, and they are masculine, "fag" is not used because of the individual's masculinity. A heterosexual male acting femininely will be called a "fag" because of their failure to perform gender roles. This quotation highlights that the term fag is used primarily as a label for violating gender norms. Her interviews also affirm that while boys are in the presence of their peers, they can always be called a fag for doing something not seen as hegemonically masculine, and that boys call each other fags in order to deflect the label from themselves. These two pieces of literature bring together the ways in which boys call each other names in violation of established norms, and the problems that make it difficult for the school to address this name calling.

Finally, some of the literature includes the topics of violence and non-conformity among LGBT and gender queer students. Slaatten (2014) analyzes why heterosexual students call their

peers a gay-related name, such as “fag”, “queer”, and “homo”, and whether it actually related to the student’s sexual orientation. The research indicates incidents of gay name-calling were mostly the result of a violation of established gender norms and in response to seeing something stupid (31-32). These results connect to Pascoe’s (2005) work because Slaatten’s (2014) quantitative research and Pascoe’s (2005) qualitative research found the same main reason as to why gay name-calling is used as a social control mechanism in school. Wyss (2004) conducted interviews to establish the different experiences gender-queer students have while expressing themselves in school. It is clear physical abuse, verbal abuse, and ostracization were common strategies used by heteronormative students against gender-queer students because of their gender (716-719). De Jong (2014) analyzed his interviews with school social workers to understand how schools are not fully equipped to work with LGBT and gender variant students. He explains how the school is able to help students and teach the student body that they need to be accepting of all backgrounds and show them respect, and links the school’s performance with issues that occur in middle school and high school (873-875). All of these pieces of literature connect to how LGBT and gender queer students are marginalized by their peers. While Slaatten (2014) and Wyss (2004) focus on the problem being the heterosexual students not accepting their LGBT peers, De Jong’s (2014) research tries to demonstrate the problem lies within the school system not teaching students to be kind and understanding. Overall, these pieces of literature connect the problems that exist when there are gender and sexuality differences that are not a part of the binary system.

Theories in the literature explain social phenomena associated with modern hegemonic practices in high school. Modern hegemony is an important concept because inequalities defined within it allow researchers to study a variety of topics relating to gender and sexual inequalities,



such as heterosexual privilege, conformity to gender norms, and the responses to violating established norms. Because of the research in the literature review, other researchers are able to analyze social phenomenon built off of hegemony. Literature based upon the concepts central to queer theory contains research on heteronormative performances of gender and sexuality and issues of breaking the binary gender system. Feminist theory based research in the literature review that is qualitative in nature explains adolescent female sexuality and the United States' modern health education curriculum lack of help for LGBT students. All of the theories in the literature review are insightful in describing problems LGBT and non-binary students must face due to school system's heteronormativity reproduction.

### **Argument 1**

Acknowledgement of LGBT and non-binary students is a necessary first step in creating a safer school environment for all students. Most of the research in the literature review clearly explains marginalization of the LGBT and non-binary communities in schools. De Jong (2014) concludes school systems blatantly fail to acknowledge and support these communities. Through this lack of communication, school systems make it more difficult for the heteronormative student body to accept LGBT and non-binary students. The marginalized groups will feel unwanted in their schools because no one is speaking on their behalfs to create an inclusive environment. Schools should hold assemblies to gather the student body and discuss anti-bullying policy, along with resources for LGBT and non-binary students in order to promote an open-minded and accepting culture in the school.

Another way to create an accepting school environment is to break down gender segregated activities by implementing gender inclusive clubs, education, and facilities. Providing gender inclusive sports teams and health education programs will help combat systematic

ostracization of non-binary and transgender students. These actions will blur gender performance expectations of students, allowing them to be more expressive without being as criticized by their peers. Kocsis (2017) elaborates on the negative effects of having binary gender health education programs. She concludes including LGBT and non-binary sections in health education curriculums will inform these minorities of their resources and normalize their presence in high school. In addition to incorporating open gender activities and education, there should also be gender nonspecific facilities. Choosing a gendered bathroom puts LGBT and non-binary students at risk of being bullied or threatened by homophobic or transphobic students. Having gender neutral bathrooms will reduce stress for LGBT and non-binary students. Multiple authors, including De Jong (2014), Pascoe (2005), and Woolley (2017) indicated a lack of effort to combat homophobic behaviors between students. Implementing stricter anti-bullying and name calling rules will combat bullying issues between all students. The new policies will also show the school system's open support for LGBT and non-binary students, signifying the school's efforts towards creating a safe space for its students. While improving the school environment for LGBT and non-binary students is important in bettering the lives of these individuals, progress in solving this issue is hindered by a lack of research.

## **Argument 2**

In order to develop a safer school environment for LGBT and non-binary students, further actions in the academic field need to be taken to help these groups of students feel secure in school. More research needs to be done on binary gender issues in school and the effects of student and systemic pressures of conformity on LGBT and non-binary students. The literature I reviewed dates back to 2004, and many older works exist. In an age where society is becoming more accepting of LGBT people, contemporary research is needed to further expand our

knowledge of gender and sexuality issues of young people growing up in this time period. Current issues still being debated involving the LGBT and non-binary communities are public bathroom rights, military service rights; and doing more research on these young minorities has many benefits. Additional research will show the significance of fixing social issues inflicted on LGBT and non-binary students, will provide insight on possible solutions to fix the issues, and will legitimize the existence of these communities in school. Even though quantitative research on this topic is difficult to conduct, it has a significant impact because it can provide insight on how a large sample of students perform gender and sexuality, which is crucial to understanding modern hegemony. Quantitative research on juvenile populations is difficult because they are protected by laws, making it harder to get data. There are limited research opportunities when the population, such as high school students, are heavily defended by the government. Not only do the juveniles have to consent to the research, but the parents of the juvenile also have to consent for their child. These kinds of restrictions make it harder to do quantitative data on juveniles because getting a large enough population to have statistically significant data. Qualitative data is much more commonly used in gender and sexuality studies because a smaller population of participants is needed to receive sufficient data for the study. Slaatten and Gabrys (2014) are the only quantitative researchers I could find studying homophobia and gender norms in high schools. Even though their research is important, they only analyze one school, and the same large group of students is in all of their studies. I suggest choosing a different country in which to conduct quantitative studies and using similar sample sizes Slaatten and Gabrys (2014) use in their research. Doing this suggested type of quantitative research allows the researcher to compare their results to Slaatten and Gabrys (2014) and analyze modern hegemony at a global scale. In general, I would consider performing research by using participant observation, and

conducting the research a half hour before the school day starts. This time of the school day is when students freely socialize in hallways and socialize with their friend groups right before their first classes start. Participant observation would allow researchers to analyze how gender norms are portrayed by various groups of students. The researcher could also study if gender segregated friend groups lead to stronger performances of heteronormative gender roles. This particular study would clarify how gender performance expectations are altered when around more male or female peers.

### **Conclusion**

Heteronormative students and the school system continually pressure heterosexual, LGBT, and non-binary students to conform to the binary gender system; these coercions successfully reinforce binary gender norms and create social anxieties among the pressured students. The knowledge gained from the literature I analyzed is critical to understanding the gender binary and the theories that explain the social effects perpetuated by the binary system. While all of the studies focus on one or two social effects, such as female sexuality or LGBT violence, not much research has been done to compile all of these aspects into one main work. Only one of the works provides a solution to a problem associated with a lack of acknowledging the gray area of the binary gender system. Most of the research overlaps with other works in terms of their theoretical background, which makes it easier to understand the foundation upon which the research and thesis are built. By editing school activities, health education programs, and bullying policy, schools can create an open and safe learning environment for all students, and express their acceptance of all students. Doing more research on the binary gender system and high school students is necessary in order to fully understand why gender conformity among heterosexuals is important. Similar to gender identity, the discussions and arguments surrounding

this topic are complex, have more than two stances, and unfortunately, are not understood by everyone.

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