

Breaking the Binary: Communication Experiences of Nonbinary Individuals in Türkiye

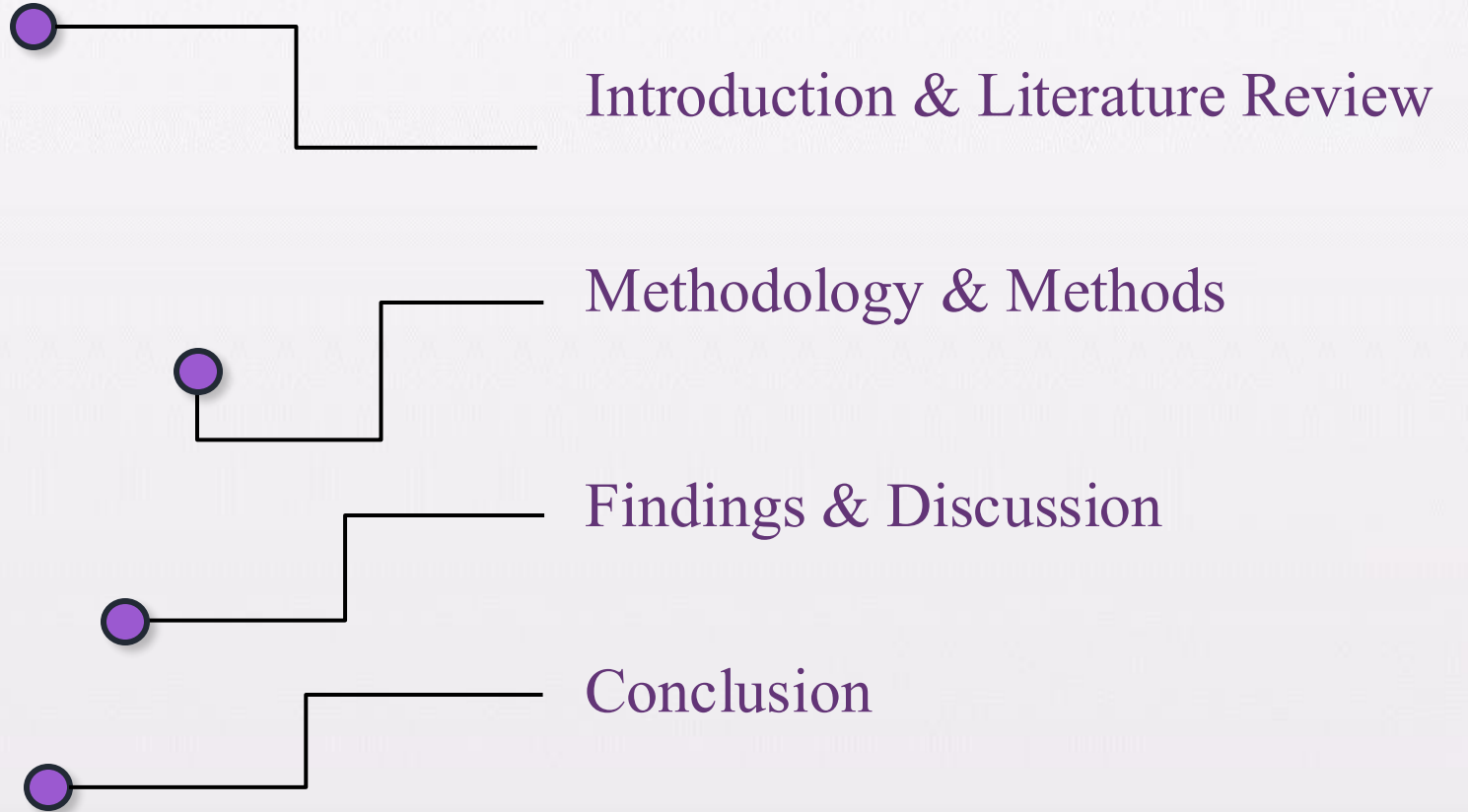
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Outline:



An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes. The composition is dominated by vibrant yellow and deep purple hues, with black accents. The strokes are layered and textured, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.



Background and Context

Turkish law, though binary sex marker change is possible (Sunata et al., 2022), considers individuals to be male or female according to the sex on their birth certificate. This means that non-binary genders are not recognized in Turkish law.

The attitudes toward LGBTQ+ persons by both state and society have several effects on policies that are created, and in return, these attitudes are shaped by policies and state actions in a vicious cycle, resulting in further alienation and exclusion of marginalized individuals (Lewis et al., 2017; Yılmaz & Göçmen, 2016).

New laws and legal actions in Türkiye continue to complicate and negatively affect the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. LGBTQ+ people are vulnerable to social isolation, physical abuse, and violence that may even escalate to acts of homicide or suicide (Yenilmez, 2021).



Research Question

How do nonbinary people, predominantly speaking Turkish and living in Türkiye, try to communicate to other people that they are nonbinary?

- Impact of the Turkish language
- Verbal and nonverbal strategies and challenges
- Context



Uğur Altun, 2021

Positionality & Motivation

June 2015:

“My Coming Out Story; Not Right out of the closet!

[originally in English] I think this is an expression that has no Turkish equivalent.”

My Coming Out Story; Not Right out of the closet!

Sanırım Türkçe karşılığı olmayan bir ifade bu. Bildiğimiz gibi, her bir ülkede yaşıyoruz, ki her bir ülkenin kolay olmadığına eminim, sonuçta insanlarla yaşıyoruz. Çıkar hikayenden önce, ne kadar ve nasıl ilerde kaldım, ileride neler yaptım sanırım bunları anlatmak istiyorum önce. İlk fark ettiğim zamanlar 9-12 yaşındaydım, fark ettiğim şey kadınlar dan hoşlanıyor olduğum değildi onu zaten biliyordum, erkek kadın herkes ilgimi çekiyordu. Fark ettiğim şey bir kız çocuğun başka bir erkekle kadın herkes ilgimi çekiyordu. Fark ettiğim şey bir kız çocuğun başka bir erkekle kadın herkes ilgimi çekiyordu. Sınıfta bu konusmalar yapıldığı...

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

- Gender is more than two! Beyond and outside the binary: Non-binary (translated by me) (**Tar, 2021**)
- Beyond the Gender Binary: Being Non-binary in Turkey (**Toraman, 2024**)
- A Problem-Oriented Approach to the Representation of Non-binary Sexual Identities in Audiovisual Translation (**Alan & Okyayuz, 2022**)



Tar, 2021 (Design: Bartu, 2021)

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

- Two primary theoretical frameworks inform my study: **symbolic interactionism and queer theory.**
- Key theories like Goffman's dramaturgy and Butler's concept of gender performance guided my analysis.



Hasan Doğan Yılmaz, 2022

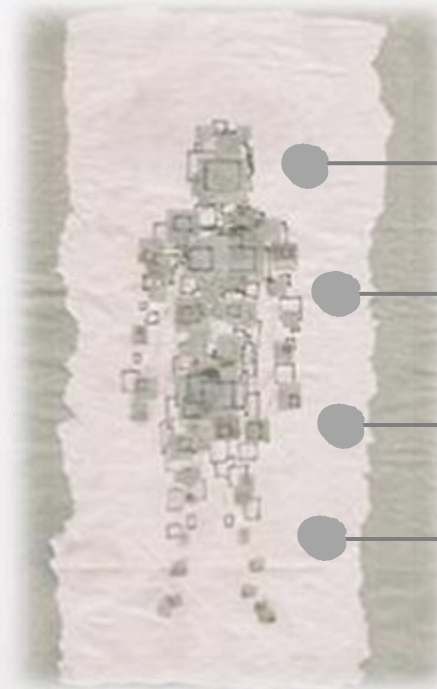
Methodology and Methods

Qualitative interpretive approach

Snowball sampling method

In-depth semi-structured interviews

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022)



Özgür Erkök Moroder, 2015

Identify as nonbinary

Aged between 18 - 32

Use Turkish as the main language in their daily life

Had recently lived in Türkiye for at least five consecutive years

Findings

Overarching Theme: Gender and Communication	
Themes	Sub-themes
Characteristics of Turkish: “A somewhat gender-neutral language”	Pronoun Use
	Binary-gendered Use of Turkish
	Gender-related Terminology
Strategies and Adaptations: “I think you are how you feel”	Strategies for Communication
	Educating Others
	Gender Expression
Communicating Gender Identity in Various Contexts: “More than sharing, I insist on being seen and accepted”	Motivations to Communicate
	Selective Disclosure Based on Closeness
	Tailoring the Disclosure
	Prefer not to Communicate

Findings

2nd Theme	Sub-themes
Strategies and Adaptations: “I think you are how you feel”	Strategies for Communication: “After all, people want to define themselves” <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Learning and using terminology- Using other languages/slangs and translating concepts- Being straightforward- Using humor
	Educating Others: “So, being nonbinary is a bit like LGBT 102”
	Gender expression: “My clothing does not determine my gender”

“Everyone announced their pronouns [in English], and at some point, we discussed the ‘elitist’ aspect of it. Because people whose native language is not Turkish already exist on this platform, and, you know, they are already forced to speak Turkish due to a kind of nationalism aspect, and on top of that, adding the elitist attitude of needing to know English.” (Fikret)

Findings

3rd Theme	Sub-themes
Communicating Gender Identity in Various Contexts: “More than sharing, I insist on being seen and accepted”	Motivations to Communicate: “A burden was lifted from me”
	Selective Disclosure Based on Closeness: “A strange hierarchy”
	Tailoring the Disclosure: “Because nonbinary is not intelligible to my boomer father.” - Access to healthcare
	Prefer not to Communicate: “I don’t think I owe them coming out.”

“In the family, the reason why I recently came out to my father was because I wanted to start hormones. And you know, I couldn’t come out as nonbinary because I had to come out in an intelligible way in order to start hormones. Because nonbinary is not intelligible to my boomer father!” (Indigo)

Discussion



Cisheteronormativity



Unintelligibility



Continuous Coming Out



Intersectionality

Discussion



Cisheteronormativity



Unintelligibility



Continuous Coming Out



Intersectionality

Discussion



Cisheteronormativity



Unintelligibility



Continuous Coming Out



Intersectionality

Discussion



Cisheteronormativity



Unintelligibility



Continuous Coming Out



Intersectionality

Discussion



Cisheteronormativity



Unintelligibility



Continuous Coming Out



Intersectionality

Limitations

- Having a small sample limited in diversity, as participants were highly educated, predominantly lived in big cities, and all but one spoke English.
- Not analyzing online communication.



Recommendations & Conclusion

- Explore digital expressions (diaries, blogs, photo essays, social media, photovoice.)
- Comparative studies on gender and language.
- Investigate Turkish gender-neutral language as a tool for feminist resistance.



“Gender is a construct; play with its settings”
Semih Özkarakaş, July 14, 2023

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Thank you!

SARAH C.B. GUTHRIE
NONBINARY PRIDE

Participant Demographics:

Pseudonym	Gender Identity
Fikret	Nonbinary Agender Transmasculine Transman
Pera	Nonbinary Transmasculine
Moray	Nonbinary Transmasculine
Elvin	Nonbinary
Nova	Nonbinary
İndigo	Nonbinary Transmasculine
Bulut	Nonbinary, Twink
Iraz	Nonbinary
Rüzgar	Nonbinary
Odil	Gender nonconforming, Nonbinary
Ekin	Nonbinary Transmasculine
Deniz	Nonbinary
Mika	Agender*, Nonbinary

Summary:

Participants:

Age range: 21 - 32

Average age 27

Participants in terms of the language they speak:

- 4 participants speak only Turkish and English.
- 2 participants speak Turkish and some English.
- 1 participant speaks Turkish and Kurdish.
- 3 participants speak Turkish, English and some German.
- 1 participant speaks Turkish, English and German.
- 1 participant speaks Turkish, English and French.
- 1 participant speaks Turkish, English, Italian and Spanish.

The city/region where the respondents have predominantly lived in the last five years:

- 6 participants Ankara
- 4 participants Istanbul
- 1 participant Izmir
- 1 participant Black Sea Region
- 1 participant Southeast Anatolia

Education levels of the participants:

- 7 participants are master's degree graduates/students
- 5 participants are undergraduate graduates/students
- 1 respondent is a high school graduate/student

Recent Context

Turkey draft bill could write 'biological sex' into law and criminalise 'promotion' of LGBTQ

Proposed legislation will also introduce prison time for conducting same-sex marriage ceremonies



LGBTQ campaigners and journalists have faced abuse and harassment, while university groups have been [targeted](#) by police.

On 18 February, Kaos GL's editor-in-chief Yildiz Tar was [detained](#) by police during a widespread sweep targeting leftist and pro-Kurdish journalists, and remains in detention.

Tar previously told MEE the country was becoming increasingly unsafe for campaigning journalists such as himself.

"They are trying to impose an anti-LGBTI agenda on society," he said in 2021.

"It is not the case that there is a huge societal group that is against LGBTI people, but rather the government, political parties and media that are sponsored by the government are always targeting LGBTI people."

By **Alex MacDonald**

Published date: 27 February 2025 17:24 GMT | Last update: 3 weeks 3 days ago

619
Shares



Draft legislation could see "biological sex" written into law in [Turkey](#) and the "promotion" of LGBTQ rights criminalised.

[According](#) to a draft document from the justice ministry acquired by LGBTQ rights group Kaos GL, the new legislation would also introduce prison time for those who conduct same-sex marriage ceremonies.

One provision to be added to the Turkish penal code would mandate that a "person who publicly encourages, praises or promotes attitudes and behaviours contrary to the biological sex at birth and public morality shall be sentenced to imprisonment of one year to three years".

"If persons of the same sex perform an engagement or marriage ceremony, they shall be sentenced to imprisonment from one year and six months to four years," said the document, which was obtained by Kaos GL from a ministry source.

Other aspects of the bill would raise the age at which one can begin the process of gender reassignment from 18 to 21 and make changing your gender on official documents more difficult.

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-write-biological-sex-law-and-criminalise-promotion-lgbtq>

Recent Context



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on June 4 once again targeted the LGBTI+ community in the country.

Speaking after the cabinet meeting in the capital Ankara, Erdoğan compared the community with "fascism," and said, "the imposition of LGBT has turned into a form of tyranny, oppression and a means of corrupting society that surpasses even fascism," state-run Anadolu Agency reported.

Erdoğan said that the family institution as a whole has been through "the toughest test of its history and has been subjected to the heaviest attacks."

Pride parades are banned and violently dispersed each year. Homosexuality is not a crime in Turkey, but hostility to it is widespread.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) officials and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have stated on various occasions that they will work on preparing a new constitution, including regulations on "protecting the family structure" against "perverted movements," targeting the LGBTI+ community in the country.

<https://www.duvarenglish.com/in-new-hate-speech-turkeys-erdogan-says-imposition-of-lgbt-turns-into-tyranny-surpassing-even-fascism-news-64460>

Mubi Cancels Turkish Film Festival Over Istanbul City Hall 'Queer' Ban

By [Melanie Goodfellow](#) 🌈
November 7, 2024 11:10am

Hours before the opening of MUBI Fest Istanbul 2024, which we have been meticulously planning for months, and which was announced a few weeks ago and sold out days ago, we were informed that the screening of "Queer" — the festival's opening film — has been banned by a decision of the Kadıköy District Governorate of Istanbul.

<https://variety.com/2024/film/global/mubi-cancels-turkish-festival-queer-banned-1236203872/>

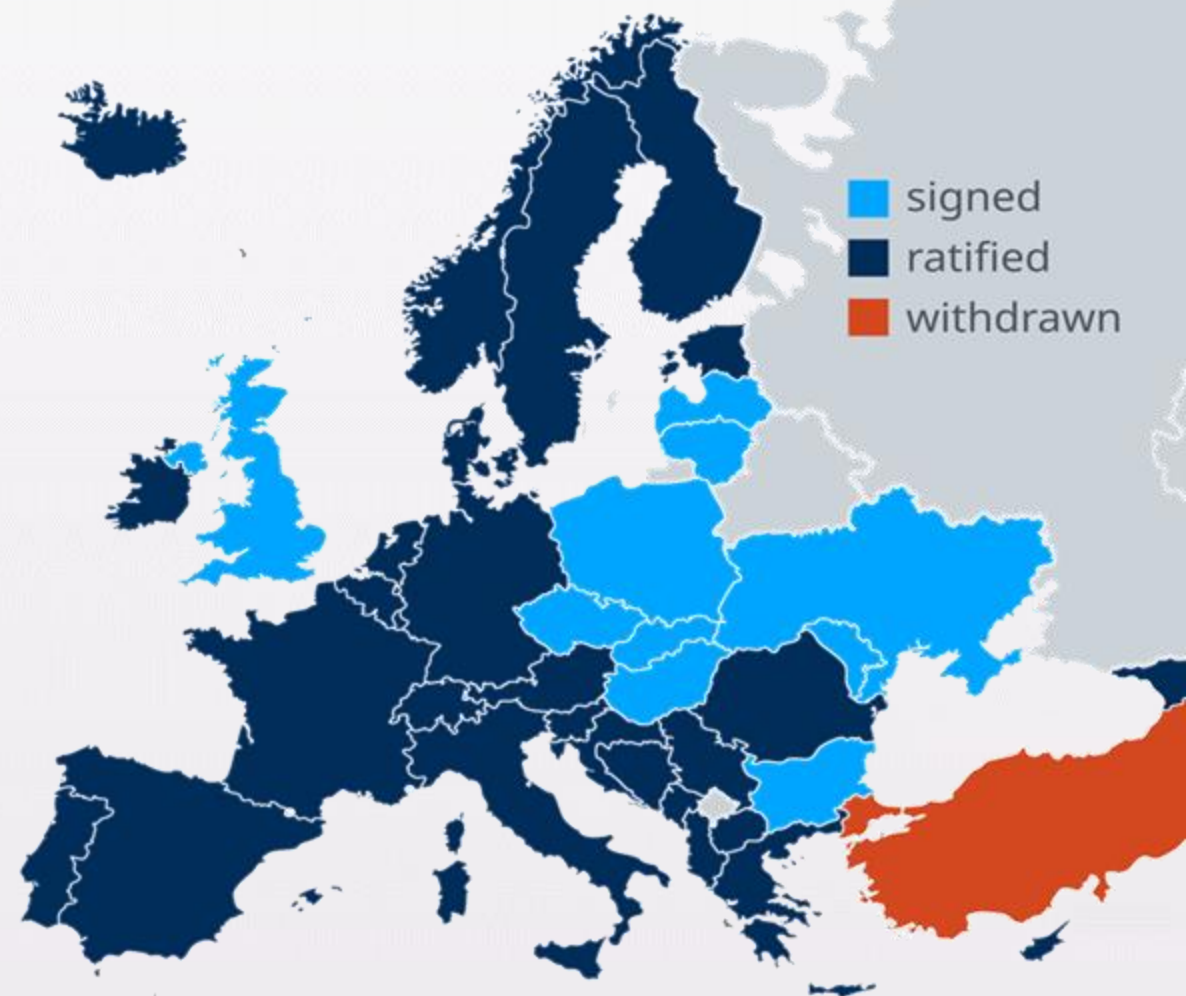
Background and Context

The Istanbul Convention: A tool to tackle violence against women and girls

«The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) is the first instrument in Europe to set legally binding standards specifically to prevent gender-based violence, protect victims of violence and punish perpetrators.

EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service
Author: Ulla Jurviste and Rosamund Shreeves, Members' Research Service
PE 608.814

Istanbul Convention in Europe



Turkey's withdrawal goes into effect on 1 July 2021.



Source: Council of Europe | Status as of 07/05/2021

Background and Context

On 20 March 2021, **Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Türkiye's President**, announced the country's **withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention by presidential decree** – a procedure many experts in Türkiye have criticized as unconstitutional. The government justified its decision with spurious claims that the Istanbul Convention was being used to “**normalize homosexuality**”, and that, as such, it was “**incompatible with Türkiye's social and family values.**”

«In Turkey, the partisan press printed opeds stating that the ‘**feminist-homosexual movement initiated imposition of genderlessness to eliminate the distinction between man and woman, which destroys the foundations of family**’» (Bayar, 2023).





Background and Context

Article 4 – Fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination

3. The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status.

In 2023, 315 women were killed by men, and 248 women were found suspiciously dead.

We Will Stop Femicides Platform 2023 Annual Report

As the We Will Stop Femicides Platform, we have been collecting data on femicides since 2008. In the past 15 years, the only year in which femicides decreased was 2011, the year the Istanbul Convention was signed. Since the start of the discussions around the Istanbul Convention, there has been an increase in femicides and suspicious deaths of women. In another year we spent without the Istanbul Convention, there has been a notable surge in femicides and suspicious deaths of women. Despite the fact that the effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention saves women's lives, the political power withdrew from it.



Language & Gender: Turkish

Gender exists in different degrees in various languages; for example, languages such as German and French have grammatical gender. In these languages, almost every noun has a grammatical gender. In languages such as English, gender is expressed with pronouns, and kinship or gender is seen in some occupations (Stahlberg et al., 2007). In genderless languages in which Turkish is included, there are no grammatical structures that indicate gender in the language besides kinship words and some exceptions (Gökmen & Peçenek, 2023), through cultural context and individual expression, the language often becomes gendered in practice, reinforcing existing gender roles.

Turkish does not have grammatical gender. Human nouns and pronouns usually do not indicate whether the person referred to is female or male.

In Turkish we used 'o' equivalent for 'he, she, it'.

O gitti 'she went, he went, it went'.

Still, there is a significant presence of semantically-implied gender (covert gender) in Turkish. Traditional social structures in Türkiye tend to reinforce binary gender norms, which create challenges for nonbinary individuals.

Terminology: Sexual Orientation vs. Gender Identity

İkilik Dışı Cinsel Kimliklerin Görsel-İşitsel Çeviride Yansıtımına İlişkin Sorun Odaklı Bir Yaklaşım

A Problem-Oriented Approach to the Representation of Non-Binary Sexual Identities in Audiovisual Translation

Araştırma/Research

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Findings:

1st Theme	Sub-themes
Characteristics of Turkish: “a somewhat gender-neutral language”	Pronoun Use
	Binary-gendered Use of Turkish
	Gender-related Terminology

«A lot of people really don't know English, and when you say you're nonbinary, it's a hard concept for them to grasp. It's a new thing in the language.» (Fikret)

«Expressing yourself, you're already in a non-normative realm for cis-hetero people. And they don't have much knowledge about these topics. On top of that, you go there and express yourself with an English word. It's like the conversation moves further away from you, and the person also drifts apart from you.» (Moray)

Findings:

1st Theme	Sub-themes
Characteristics of Turkish: “a somewhat gender-neutral language”	Pronoun Use: “both a plus and a minus”
	Binary-gendered Use of Turkish: “not as gender-neutral as it seems”
	Gender-related Terminology: “The language is indeed insufficient for explaining.” <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Gender Identity vs. Sexual Orientation- The concepts of “sex” vs “gender”- The concept of “nonbinary”

«I’m going to work, it’s seven o’clock. My day hasn’t really started yet. It starts on the [subway]. ‘Hey son, can I pass?’ ‘Hey son, get up, let me sit.’ I’m already going to work, Ms. Mika. I’m confused. I go back out again on the road. ‘Hey son, sir this and that.’ ‘Sir.’ It happens, I mean. Sometimes tiring, sometimes funny. But at the moment, it’s tiring.» (Mika)

Findings:

3rd Theme	Sub-themes
Communicating Gender Identity in Various Contexts: “More than sharing, I insist on being seen and accepted”	Motivations to Communicate
	Selective Disclosure Based on Closeness
	Tailoring the Disclosure
	Prefer Not to Communicate

Tailoring their disclosure to access gender-affirming healthcare.

«In order to be able to have surgery, there are designated hospitals where you can start the gender affirmation, they can prescribe you hormones, etc. When I first went there for permission for surgery, I didn't tell them that I was nonbinary because I thought that I wouldn't be accepted as nonbinary and I wouldn't be able to get permission for surgery. And it was difficult for me in that process, I mean, I have been pretending all my life to fit in, now I want another fit to be comfortable and to be myself, but for that I have to lie again that I am a man.» (Iraz)

«Whenever I want to go through any process, let's say when I want to start hormones, I am expected to display a transmasculine identity. I might be a trans man as well, but I have to display it and say that I am only a trans man.» (Fikret)