



Young trans people's experiences of leisure and mental health: Belonging, creativity, and navigation

Anne Christina Gotfredsen^{*}, Ida Linander

Department of Epidemiology and Global Health, Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

There is a lack of research on young trans people's everyday leisure. This article analyses how leisure, defined within a broad spatial context beyond sport and physical activity, is perceived and experienced by trans youth in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. We draw upon theoretical concepts of cisnormativity and spatiality to our analysis of sixteen interviews with young trans people (16-25 years old) in Sweden. Three themes emerged. The first refers to how both queer- and non-queer-specific leisure spaces connect people with similar (and different) experiences regarding queer and trans identities and shows how these identities can shift in importance. The second highlights how creative spaces (e.g., theatre, cosplay) can offer opportunities to carve out a leisured space to explore different gender identity/ies and expressions that are often crucial and life changing. The final theme illustrates how leisure is avoided, postponed, waited for, and reclaimed by trans youth. Excluding mechanisms such as transphobia, cisnormativity, and the lack of access to gender-confirming care can hinder young people's leisure participation. Our analysis illustrates the complex connections between leisure and mental health among young people with trans experiences. Leisure can be a source of discomfort and distress but also of belongingness and affirmation of one's identity. Finding and accessing strengthening leisure spaces demands emotional investment, engagement, and navigation.

1. Introduction

Previous research shows that a high proportion of young trans people (here defined as people who do not identify with the gender assigned at birth and includes both trans and non-binary people) report mental illness, including depression, suicidality, and self-harm (Becerra-Culqui et al., 2018; Connolly et al., 2016; Thoma et al., 2019). In Sweden, as well as in other countries, the proportion of young trans people who report poor mental health is significantly higher than among young cis people but also higher than among older transgender people (Forte, 2018; The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2015; Becerra-Culqui et al., 2018; Thoma et al., 2019). One contributor to this relatively higher mental ill health among trans people is less access to safe and inclusive spaces for leisure (Linander et al., 2019).

Apart from health care, employment, and education, the societal sphere of leisure, including sports, is an important arena for the equal participation of trans people (Elling-Machartzki, 2017). Previous research shows how sports and physical activity are experienced and perceived as unsafe by trans people. This leads to an avoidance of these

spaces with consequences for wellbeing (Linander et al., 2019). A systematic review by Jones et al. (2017b) showed barriers relating to gender identity (changing facilities etc.), transphobic behavior, lack of awareness, and discriminatory policies contributed to negative experiences of transgender athletes within competitive sports. That study argued the need for more research on trans people's everyday leisure experiences in sport and physical activity outside the competitive context. Hence, we underscore the need for more extensive knowledge on leisure, not only in relation to sports and physical activity, but across the ways in which leisure is created, perceived, and experienced by trans people.

Previous studies on youth and mental health have illustrated the important role leisure holds in relation to coping with stress (Park and Kim, 2018) and in developing a sense of belonging and collective identity (Gotfredsen et al., 2020). Yet there is a lack of research on how leisure spaces are experienced and navigated by trans people in general, and specifically by young trans people. Like the abovementioned studies on adults, most studies on leisure and trans youth concern sports and physical activity (see e.g., Jones et al., 2017a; Caudwell, 2014) and/or

^{*} Corresponding author at: Anne Gotfredsen, Department of Epidemiology and Global Health, Umeå University, SE-90187 Umeå, Sweden.
E-mail addresses: anne.gotfredsen@umu.se (A.C. Gotfredsen), ida.linander@umu.se (I. Linander).

focus on the wider LGBTQI+ youth group (see e.g., [Drury et al., 2017](#); [Theriault, 2014](#); [Dykstra and Litwiller, 2021](#)). However, some broader studies about young trans people's mental health and wellbeing have included aspects of leisure where leisure activities such as playing sport or making art, have been identified as protective factors, although these opportunities were also found to be limited by exclusive gender norms ([Zeeman et al., 2017](#)). In addition, the review by [Johns et al. \(2018\)](#) describes how most studies highlight networks and organisations where young LGBTQ people gather with allies as being fundamental for the wellbeing of trans youth.

Even if leisure activities are generally strongly associated with maintaining good health, the idea of a universal, direct, and incontrovertible link between health and leisure has been oversimplified ([Mansfield, 2020](#)). In contrast leisure engagement has been associated with negative experiences for some young people in terms of increased stress, achievement pressure, and anxiety ([Gotfredsen et al., 2020](#); [Merkel, 2013](#)). More in-depth studies are therefore needed to analyse the complexity and multi-faceted nature of leisure spaces from the perspective of young trans people.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how leisure is perceived and experienced by young trans people in relation to their mental health. The study is conducted in Sweden, a country historically regarded as LGBTQ friendly with a strong advocacy for LGBTQ rights. However, Sweden has the last couple of years been criticized for lagging when it comes to trans rights, for example concerning gender-confirming care for young people ([ILGA-Europe, 2022](#)).

We draw upon the theoretical concepts of cisnormativity and a spatial understanding of leisure in our analysis of sixteen interviews with young trans people (16-25 years old). It is important to disentangle how leisure might cause deteriorating mental health, but also how leisure can be strengthening and function as an important arena for improving wellbeing. In this study, we base our definition of leisure on the participants' perceptions and understandings of leisure. However, we also recognise that leisure is shaped and materialised by spatiality, a concept which is explored below.

1.1. Conceptual framework

To disentangle and analyse young trans people's experiences of leisure we turn to the concept of cisnormativity ([Bauer et al., 2009](#); [Linander et al., 2019](#); [Nord et al., 2016](#)). Cisnormativity can be described as the social discourses and practices that assume that individuals identify and stereotypically behave in line with the gender assigned at birth. Cisnormativity contributes to the construction of trans experiences as unintelligible and is a factor in spatial and policy-related practices which exclude trans people (see e.g., [Enke, 2012](#); [Kennedy, 2013](#)). Since spaces are gendered, they create barriers and difficulties in navigating gender-binary spaces (e.g., public toilets, changing rooms) ([Linander et al., 2019](#)). This affects many aspects in the lives of people with trans experiences by, for example, contributing to restricted mobility and social exclusion ([Vo, 2021](#); [Browne et al., 2010](#), [Doan, 2010](#); [Kennedy, 2013](#)). Cisnormativity, together with an understanding of spaces as gendered, provides us with an analytical frame that can be understood as a spatialisation of norms, where both bodies and spaces are understood as always oriented in specific ways (see also [Ahmed, 2006](#)).

Space is also a fundamental dimension of leisure, since leisure is always spatially organised (digitally, physically, commercially etc.) ([Gotfredsen, 2021](#); [Lewis and Johnson, 2011](#); [Glover, 2017](#)). When it comes to queer leisure spaces, both virtual and physical spaces have been described as sites of safety, community, political power, resistance, and identity formation ([Anderson and Knee 2021](#); [Vo, 2021](#)). However, just as within non-queer specific leisure, these so-called 'safe spaces' are not free from discrimination and exclusion ([Caudwell, 2014](#); [Vo, 2021](#)). Studies show how, for example, people with trans experiences and/or with experiences of being racialized are being marginalized in LGBTQ+

communities, turning it into a space of risk and potential harm ([McCormick and Barthelemy, 2021](#)).

In this study, we use cisnormativity, as an analytical concept, to explore normative discourses and practices in leisure spaces and allow better understanding of how such discourses might be challenged and resisted in these spaces. This can, for example, highlight the spatial possibilities different bodies have within leisure and how bodies as well as spaces are oriented by cisnormativity (see [Ahmed, 2006](#)). In sum, we are interested in how leisure spaces are constructed, avoided, appreciated, and claimed by young trans people and how such experiences can affirm and/or negate one's gender identity and expression, with consequences for mental health and wellbeing.

2. Methods

The analysis is based on individual, semi-structured interviews with young trans people. The interviews were conducted within a project on young trans people's mental health and access to healthcare in Sweden. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions across three themes: experiences of wellbeing and mental health, experiences of meeting trans-specific health care and experiences of other types of health care. Follow-up questions were based on participants' responses. The participants often talked about leisure when discussing their wellbeing and especially in relation to how they perceived leisure activities as impacting their mental health in different ways.

To recruit participants, advertising material for this study was distributed across networks (that, for example, organise events for the trans community), on social media (mainly Facebook), and through Swedish transgender associations. A targeted advertisement via Facebook was also used to reach potential informants. In the advertising material it was stated that we were recruiting "people with trans experiences and/or that identify as a trans person" (in the Swedish context, this implies both trans people identifying in binary and non-binary ways). The ad included a form for potential participants to sign up for more information, and later to be contacted by one of the researchers to schedule an interview. All interviews were conducted in Swedish and as videophone calls (due to COVID-19), recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before the interviews, the interviewer (Ida Linander) reiterated the information letter and recorded informed oral consent from all participants. The interviews were conducted between November 2020 and March 2021 and were between 35 minutes and two hours (median 65 minutes) in length. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing the material and using pseudonyms. The Swedish Ethical Review Authority has approved the study (Dnr: 2020-00929).

The 16 participants lived in different parts of Sweden and were aged between 16 and 25. Three were aged under 20. Nine people identified as male or transmasculine, four as non-binary and three as female or transfeminine. Nine were studying (five at university), four were working and three were unemployed. Thirteen had met a gender identity evaluation team, and two were waiting for their first visit. Eleven had undergone gender-confirming care (such as hormone, surgery, or voice therapy, etc.). Two participants were racialised as non-white. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following the steps suggested by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). First, both researchers (Gotfredsen & Linander) familiarised themselves with the interview material by reading it repeatedly. Secondly, the first author conducted initial coding. Thirdly, using this coding and based on discussions between the authors, the material was thematised. Fourthly, the themes were revised in relation to the analytical framework. While the interviewees' narratives are central to this paper, the thematic analytical perspective allowed us to see individual stories in relation to theory and previous research. The findings are structured around three specific themes: 1) belonging, normalcy, and resistance in leisure spaces, 2) creative (gender) play in leisure spaces, and 3) avoiding, postponing, or reclaiming leisure.

3. Findings

3.1. *Belonging, normalcy, and resistance in leisure spaces*

Creating and engaging in safe and supportive spaces of leisure was central to the mental health and wellbeing of all participants. This first theme concerns how leisure is an important context for wellbeing through creating feelings of belonging, normalcy, and resistance. Some of these spaces were specific to queer or trans people with the possibility of meeting others with shared experiences similarly oriented by cis-normativity. This contributed to a sense of community and belongingness, as described by Dylan when talking about their local queer youth club:

"Even though I felt bad because I was trans and all that, in one way, I was recognised there. They said the right pronoun, they used a different name that I feel more comfortable with. It just felt so much better. I did a lot of fun stuff. It was, I don't know, it was just so good to be part of this group who felt the same way as me or was just like me."

Hanging out and having fun around others who respected and confirmed one's chosen name, pronoun, and identity was important when struggling with poor mental health related to, for example, waiting for trans-specific health care or accepting one's identity. In contrast to narratives about being objectified and examined by the 'medical gaze', in these leisure spaces one could safely talk about trans and gender identities on their own terms, as shared by Niklas:

"I think it helps a lot ... to feel safe in a way. To just be able to exist or to explore or just to talk. [...] You need other contexts to be able to talk about trans identity because I know some trans people who kind of feel like they can't openly talk to their psychologist at the gender evaluation or the doctor."

The opportunity to reflect and talk about your trans-identity on one's own terms allowed not only a sharing of similarities, but also differences in the many ways in which one could identify and express as a trans person. Ismail, a member of a nation wide trans separatist community reflects on the matter:

"I really appreciate my loved ones for respecting me the way I am, but in the end, they don't understand what I'm going through. Talking to people who have similar experiences has made a huge difference. There are also different types of trans people and not everyone defines themselves in the same way. And it's been positive for me to see that as well because it's allowed me to accept myself in a completely different way. And who I am as a trans person."

The positive experience from meeting others with different ways to identify as a trans person made it possible for Ismail to accept their own identity. The quote also highlights the importance of sharing a space with others who know how it is to be a young trans person, even though you have others providing support. Furthermore, queer specific leisure spaces, such as queer youth clubs, are not only crucial for meeting others, or building a sense of belonging and having fun, but also in terms of feeling 'normal', which was identified as being fundamental for mental health. When asked how queer or trans-specific leisure spaces affect one's mental health, Emilia said "It helps by normalizing it a bit, to feel that there are others you can share experiences with." However, sharing a space such as a youth queer club also gave the opportunity to just hang out and socialize. As Niklas expressed it, one's queer or trans identity did not always have to be centred: "We are here and that we are trans or that we're gay or whatever doesn't need to be mentioned, it's just there. And then we can play board games or talk about series or just be". This was explained to create a sense of normalcy with the potential to extend beyond queer-specific leisure spaces, by bringing a sense of being 'normal' into other non-LGBTQ contexts. Leisured spaces did not necessarily have to be queer-specific per se for participants to experience an inclusive and safe environment:

"I've moved quite little in specific LGBTQ circles. But based on the hobbies I have, I move in circles that are also LGBTQ-friendly. This is where all the trans people with the same interest meet up. And that way

I've made a couple of good friends that somehow know what it's like" (Joachim).

As Joachim explains, rather than one's queer identity being the commonality bringing people together within a certain space, it could be the specific leisure activity and organisation experienced and perceived as inclusive and queer-friendly, and by that, attracting queer people. Especially the gaming community (online gaming, board games, and role-play) was perceived as more queer in terms of being 'different' compared with more traditional types of leisure, such as sports. It was experienced as an inclusive place for young people in general who do not conform to the 'typical' norms (not only regarding gender identity), as explained by Joachim when asked about how the gaming community attracted queer youth:

"I think there's a critical mass within the community who somehow doesn't fit the norm. And many of them have, in very large quotation marks, been a little bit of outcasts ... nerds ... and perhaps bullied throughout school [...] I experience a strong and consistent value that it is essential that everyone feels welcomed in these spheres."

In this sense, it functioned as a queer leisure space without necessarily being a dedicated queer organisation.

Some participants talked more explicitly about specific leisure spaces as counter spaces, where belonging was not only built on shared experiences but also on resistance and striving for social change, as Sadie explained when describing their local LGBTQ association:

"I believe it's just discussing with people in a similar situation and a sense of belonging as well. Just about the fact that like, yeah, we are going through this together and we've got to fight it together. And we're going to make a difference."

Not only did leisure spaces open up possibilities for change but also for the difficulties arising from transphobia and cisnormativity to be negotiated and resisted, blurring the lines between what is political and what is leisure.

Online communities such as 'Slack' and 'Discord'¹ were also described as central in offering opportunities to easily connect with others, something that was highlighted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: "After this last year I see that these communities are now [...] more accessible than ever I would say. Because now you don't even have to leave your home or go to a place where you risk being outed or something like that. It's enough to be in your room with a pair of headphones and you have access to all that [...] even if I'm in a low mood I can take part of (online) communities and groups" (Alex).

As explained by Alex, online spaces were described as a safer and more accessible option to meet and socialise with others, especially when struggling with poor mental health. Other participants described how they were only open about their trans-experiences or identity with others online: "At that time, I was still not out as trans so [...] it was really fun to come home and chat to people on different forums" (Ebba). Hence, having access to digital communities was experienced as an easier and more accessible way to avoid and shortcut cisnormative spaces. Yet, finding and creating offline and online safe leisure spaces where one can 'just be' is not something that comes easy, rather it requires effort:

"There are contexts where I don't feel as safe or maybe don't feel that I belong in the same way. But then I have also worked quite actively to find other spaces where I feel safe or feel that I belong or feel that I can contribute with something" (Niklas).

Creating or carving these queer leisure spaces demands engagement and navigation, especially in relation to ensuring safe inclusive leisure spaces.

Within the first theme, we have illustrated how leisure spaces, both queer- and non-queer-specific, connect people with similar (and different) experiences regarding queer and trans-identities, illustrating

¹ Slack and Discord are digital social platforms for online communication via audio and chat

how these identities and expressions can shift in importance. Leisure functions as a space for community-building and solidarity - "queer people stick together", as Eddie puts it. The narratives show the importance of leisure spaces for wellbeing in relation to having fun, enjoying a hobby, and providing opportunities to 'just be', but also in terms of normalcy, belonging, sharing experiences and resistance. These experiences of leisure spaces can be understood as providing important alternatives to other spaces in society permeated by cisnormativity, although finding and accessing these strengthening leisure spaces also demands emotional investment.

3.2. Creative (gender) play in leisure spaces

When discussing different aspects of mental health and the relation between leisure and mental health, several participants emphasised the importance of creativity in contributing to their emotional wellbeing. This creativity was expressed through painting, writing, reading manga and anime, bullet journaling, drawing, and paper crafting. These examples were described as offering a space to yourself and a chance to just do your own thing, and to boost your mood: "I like to paint a lot. It's really such therapy for me to just sit and paint." (Dylan). Creativity was perceived as having a positive impact on participants' emotional wellbeing in terms of relaxation and a form of 'focused distraction' as Connor explained: "Once I get into it [arts] it's like nothing else exists and I'm just so focused on that specific thing".

Within these spaces of leisure, participants also explored and played with different gender identities and expressions. Some described how their first thoughts about their gender identity took shape and materialised within certain leisure spaces, e.g., cosplay, theatre, and dancing. On the question of the relationship between cosplay, mental health, and gender identity, Mika said:

"It was there the first thoughts about myself, about my own identity came up. So, it's really a good way to test things and play around and discover [...] I can try different characters and feel which one feels good and which one doesn't, and why not ... and which ones do I feel most at home in".

According to the participants, cosplay holds potential for trans youth: "you find that a lot of trans people do cosplay, just because it's an opportunity for us to explore and experiment without judgements. And for us, that's really important" (Sadie). This materialisation was described both as something one could do in your own private space, but also together with others, both online and at physical gatherings. Theatre and dance were other leisure spaces with room for exploration and creative gender play. Niklas, who had been within the theatre for many years, experienced it as having a positive influence on his mental health, he explains why: "To be allowed to create something together with others but also to create yourself in some way." Theatre culture was discussed as being less gender binary and less rigid in relation to gender roles, with room for different kinds of gender expressions, as described by Eddie:

"It is a lot about playing around with identity, gender and presentation and I needed that to find my identity. It was also very good to get away from various expectations like "as a woman, you should look like this and do this" and to step into the theatre and all of that stuff is wiped out [...] the gender division wasn't as strong. For me, it changed my life and how I perceive things. To take the stage pretending to be someone else than me, while also finding myself, oddly enough".

Hence, having access to a space and a community which encourages a playful openness can be fundamental when figuring out one's gender identity and gender expressions. Such possibilities were mainly found in spaces that were oriented in specific ways, perceived as less gender stereotypical and with a less strong gender division, and where it is more socially acceptable to not adhere to traditional gender norms.

However, our material also contains some more complex stories illustrating how creative spaces of leisure could offer both an explorative freedom, while at the same time reproducing traditional gender norms,

in addition to negative attitudes and misgendering, as Mika - both a cosplayer and a dancer - described:

"Well, there are both positive and negative aspects [with dancing], just like with anything else. On one hand, you constantly struggle with misgendering and how people look at you and talk to you. [...] But on the other hand, there is a freedom, just like with cosplay, that you can experiment and try to figure out who am I in all this".

Hence, creative leisure spaces were also experienced as shaped and oriented by cisnormativity. In sum, this theme has illustrated how creative spaces (within e.g., dancing, cosplay, and theatre) offer an opportunity to engage in activities that benefit one's emotional wellbeing. More importantly, the theme describes how participants create and carve out a leisured space where they can explore and play with different gender identity/ies and expressions. This was experienced as crucial and even life changing in relation to becoming and finding a true(r) self. Yet, leisured spaces of arts and creativity are not free of cisnormativity, making it harder and more uncomfortable for trans youth to feel safe and express themselves as desired. This is further developed in our third and final theme.

3.3. Avoiding, postponing, or reclaiming leisure

This theme explores the experiences of avoiding, postponing, or reclaiming leisure as a young trans person. Being without leisure spaces in everyday life was described as resulting in passivity and isolation. Participants mentioned several, often intertwining, reasons for avoiding leisure spaces, as illustrated by Thom when asked whether there were any leisure activities which he would like to engage in but avoided:

"Yes yes yes definitely [...] Since I stopped swimming I haven't been in a pool. I'm normally like a fish. That's something I would like to start doing again [...] do some kind of physical activity. Because I've had many years now when I've just been sitting on my ass in front of the computer. The biggest problem is the changing room [...] a general unpleasant treatment. For no reason. It can also be threatening situations. Just knowing that something can happen makes me avoid certain activities. That's a problem in itself".

Like Thom's narrative, gyms, baths and changing rooms were perceived as spaces oriented to centre the body, resulting in feeling unsafe and uncomfortable. This sentiment extends along a continuum, from fear of violence and assault to anxiety and more subtle uncomfortable feelings when inhabiting a certain space. In addition to the risk and fear of transphobia, participants also described how not having their chosen name or pronoun respected, or being outed or asked unwanted questions, created an uncomfortable 'friction'. This discomfort was experienced in the context of cisnormativity and was given as a reason why trans youth avoided different leisure spaces when trying to navigate and ensure safety and comfort.

Further, embodied obstacles related to gendered expressions and appearance (such as make-up, wearing a binder or tucking) could also hinder leisure participation, especially in cisnormative leisure spaces where the body holds a central position (e.g., physical exercise, pools). Ebba said:

"I have been thinking about going to the gym. But I usually wear foundation as concealer for the shade from my hair growth and then I don't know how that would work. Because I can't go to the gym wearing make-up. I don't want to go if you can tell I have a stubble. And when it comes to tucking, I don't think that would work. Because I already feel nauseous if I've been dressed up a full day".

Ebba describes the reluctance of using gyms for physical exercise as connected to experiences of discomfort in several ways. Not being able to use make-up while working out results in the risk of being perceived as a non-cis person in a space that is cisnormatively oriented. It also illustrates the very tangible and embodied discomfort and difficulties in combining certain physical activities with tools that are vital for one's gendered expression.

Poor mental health was also a contributing factor for avoiding or

dropping out of leisure activities. Some described the need to stay within safe and familiar social contexts, as explained by Alex:

"I have chosen to be very selective with which people I hang out with and which people I allow into my life. I don't have any specific leisure activities currently [...] I wish I had a more established LGBTQ group or something like that, but I haven't had the energy to take the initiative to actually look for something".

Even though participants were aware of the physical and psychological benefits from engaging in social and physical activities (e.g., exercise, routines, and a social context), some described it as too emotionally demanding or draining to find and engage in what was perceived as safe leisure, as exemplified above.

Other narratives illustrate how certain leisure spaces are gendered: "I stopped riding when I was 14, I think. Because I became a girl in the stable. And this made me feel so bad that I stopped riding. I've hardly been riding since then" (Thom). Leisure spaces or activities, traditionally oriented as feminine and 'girly', such as equestrianism in this case, made it impossible for Thom to continue. Just engaging in this specific gendered space made it difficult to pass as anything else than a cis woman, affecting his mental health and wellbeing.

Another difficulty for participating in leisure was affordability, illustrating how leisure is very much a classed phenomenon. Participants described how many activities are too expensive for young people in a vulnerable financial situation: "We didn't have that much money when I was younger, so I didn't have any leisure activities until I started with the theatre when I was 12, 13" (Eddie). Some connected a vulnerable financial situation to being trans and not being able to finish or focus on education and the future since navigating gender-confirming healthcare was stressed by the participants as exhausting and requiring a lot of effort. Lack of access to or waiting for gender-confirming care was also seen as hindering leisure participation in different ways, including engaging in new hobbies and activities:

"It's really a transition period, where life is on hold. It is. [...] I don't want to start with a new hobby because they see me like this ... things like, I must change my name. I don't want to show what name I used to have" (Thom).

Life in general, including leisure participation, is put on hold while waiting for gender-affirming care and legal procedures (e.g., changing names). Thom shared how this is important to be able to present the 'real' me in a new space. This was also central in relation to physical appearance where surgical and hormonal treatment was described as essential for being able to take part in leisure in your own right and from a comfortable position. Postponing participation while imagining a future leisure life after receiving gender-affirming surgery was expressed by several participants. Ismail explained:

"As soon as I have done the surgery ... because I like sports a lot, but I feel that I can't be part of it ... So, I guess that's something I look very much forward to, after the surgery".

Due to the uncertainty of the medical evaluation in terms of being approved or not for gender-affirming care, leisure then becomes an additional part of life that you can't plan or control, "I tried not to put my life on hold [while waiting] but it is difficult" (Kian). This 'vacuum' means that opportunities for being part of leasured spaces beneficial for one's health and wellbeing are lost, including friends and social networks.

Those who had received gender-affirming care were enjoying their bodies through increased freer movement and a reclaiming of leisure spaces. Kian described this in relation to before and after receiving hormonal and surgical care, illustrating the centrality of the body when it comes to engaging in and enjoying leisure:

"I wasn't comfortable with being at the gym with other people or even go for a run in the forest with few or no one around. It was really exhausting [...] now I go to the gym, and I run a lot and it is extremely liberating to do that without it triggering anxiety".

Not having one's body correlating with desired gender identity and expression can result in dropouts or abstaining from certain leisure

activities. These experiences also illustrate how spaces for sports and physical activity are cisnormatively oriented and therefore excluding. Other strategies used to navigate leisure spaces were to change clothes at home or in the toilet or bring friends to the gym. These strategies are examples of how participation requires emotional investment and labour, which takes a heavy toll on the mental health, as explained by Joachim:

"In general, I think the heaviest toll on mental health for young trans people is that you always must be on your guard and try to navigate what kind of 'coding' one needs in a specific situation. Where can you come out or not? And who might well-meaningly out you to someone else and so on".

Navigating leasured spaces by monitoring oneself and others' behaviours are examples of strategies needed for participation in leisure. This was especially relevant when entering new leisure spaces. It was described as a constant 'scanning' of the atmosphere, or as Emilia explained on the topic of pronouns:

"It becomes very difficult, like will this person get upset if I correct them? Will they learn by themselves if I don't do it? The balancing between those options [...] If I correct them, and maybe they didn't even refer to me and then they will think that I am like fussy and then they will get cranky and think I am just hard work. So, you have to do these kind of estimations instantaneously".

Sometimes such experiences led to sacrificing one's 'true' expression of identity to navigate and possibly escape transphobic and cisnormative expressions.

This final theme highlights how leisure is avoided, postponed, navigated, waited for, and reclaimed by trans youth. Excluding mechanisms include transphobia and cisnormativity, financial resources, as well as lack of access to gender-confirming care, which can be an essential prerequisite to navigate and engage in spaces of leisure in a comfortable and safe way.

4. Concluding discussion

This study analyses how leisure, here understood as a spatial concept, is perceived and experienced by young trans people in relation to their mental health. The findings illustrate the complex interconnections between leisure spaces and mental health among young people with trans experiences, offering belongingness and affirmation of identity, but also feelings of discomfort and unsafety (see also [Drury et al., 2017](#); [Vo, 2021](#)). Building a sense of normalcy in relation to emotions and gender identity by having others around who share similar (but also different) experiences, in addition to mobilizing against cisnormativity, was identified as important for emotional wellbeing. Spatial features like these (community, resistance, belonging) have been described in previous research as life-saving and crucial in supporting an emotional healing process for older trans people ([Linander et al., 2019](#); [Higa et al., 2014](#)). The minority stress model has emphasised 'internalised transphobia' ([Hendricks and Testa, 2012](#)), also previously referred to as 'internalised cisnormativity' ([Linander, 2018](#)). Our analysis suggests internalizing a sense of normalcy – which might be understood as a coping mechanism. Having access to these spaces of leisure, where one feels perfectly 'normal' can translate into other, perhaps more cisnormative spaces, allowing coping and minimizing feelings of being 'different'. It is worth noting that even if the participants in this study shared an overall positive view of their queer leisure spaces, research shows how LGBTQ spaces can exclude young people based on, for example gender identity, sexual orientation, and racialization, with detrimental consequences to the wellbeing and sense of belonging ([McCormick and Barthelemy, 2021](#); [Vo, 2021](#)).

One of the most significant findings was the unique position creative leisure spaces held in relation to participants' mental health and wellbeing. Cosplay has been previously described as a performative space, offering not only freedom to explore spectrums of sartorial coding, but also a guise to safely perform and explore one's gender identities ([Luxe](#)

Mishou, 2021). In our study, cosplay, together with theatre and dance, were important sources of much fun and joy for several participants who especially brought to attention the importance of having a space where they could safely explore gender expressions in a playful way. Dykstra and Litwiller (2021) have emphasized the importance of drag workshops for queer youth and we agree that there is a need to recognise gender play as an important leisure activity. Our findings also shed light on such creative gender exploration being found in none (or less) queer-specific leisure sites for young people. In other words, the benefits for young people's mental health and wellbeing are not only connected to queer-specific environments but equally in other inclusive leisured spaces. This illustrates the potential 'queering' leisure spaces hold, turning them into sites for affirmation and transformation (Lewis and Johnson, 2011; Luxx Mishou, 2021) However, the importance of finding joyful outlets for gender explorations must be understood in relation to cisnormative expectations of having a 'stable' gender identity.

Both leisure spaces and bodies inhabiting them can be understood as oriented in specific ways (Ahmed, 2006). Even though all spaces are gendered (Ahmed, 2006), some leisure spaces were perceived and experienced as less cisnormative than sports, for example. Theatre, dance, and cosplay were also described and perceived by some as examples of embodied leisure. Nevertheless, these spaces seem to be less cis- and heteronormatively oriented than sport which tends to rely more on definitive oppositional categories, causing barriers for participating (Elling-Machartzki, 2017; Jones et al., 2017a). Equestrian sport was another example where the body became a barrier. Yet this was not due to uncomfortable changing rooms or non-inclusive division of teams, but rather because the leisured space of equestrianism is traditionally feminine oriented and 'girly' (Dashper, 2016). These spatialised norms made it impossible to pass, or to be perceived as anything other than a cis person, illustrating how both spaces and people are oriented by cis-normativity and gender norms more in general.

Non-inclusive, cisnormative, and unsafe spaces of leisure resulted in avoidance or dropouts. Difficulties related to combining make-up or wearing a binder when doing sports or other physical activity in a comfortable way was by some expressed as a barrier and a reason to avoid these kinds of leisure activities. Different experiences among the participants regarding such spaces can be understood in relation to how different trans embodiment might be differently oriented in certain spaces, where some are oriented as gender-confirming and others as non-confirming which also gets material consequences (see also Browne et al., 2010). For some, leisure was postponed while waiting for gender-confirming care and treatment. To be able to present a more 'true self' in terms of embodied appearance and body satisfaction (Caudwell, 2014), but also in relation to new social connections are reasons for putting leisure, together with many other things in life, on hold while waiting (Linander and Alm, 2022). The waiting might lead to a viscous circle of poorer mental health which refrains trans youth from accessing spaces of leisure and might contribute to even poorer mental health, and higher barriers for engaging in leisure.

Previous research showed how navigating workplaces, public spaces, studies, relationships, and other contexts requires both affective and emotional labour (Linander, 2018). Our study illustrates how the positive effects of leisure sometimes outweigh the negative ones, resulting in an endurance of leisure. This makes leisure another realm in life that demands affective and emotional labour in terms of navigating and adjusting in relation to gender normative expectations, and physical appearance in relation to different (leisure) spaces (Elling-Machartzki, 2017; Dykstra and Litwiller, 2021; McCormick and Barthelemy, 2021). The labour this requires in terms of catering and caring for one's own and others' emotions in leisure settings (Lewis and Johnson, 2011), in addition to carving out inclusive leisure spaces, might be stressful and overwhelming, and negatively affect the mental health of trans youth (Lundberg et al., 2022). We can understand why leisure is avoided since leisure spaces might not be an obligation in the same way as, for example, work or study. Yet the resistance, navigation, and affective

labour that goes into carving leisure spaces to make them safe(r) spaces, for oneself and others, might in itself create feelings of belonging, solidarity, and have a positive effect on mental health. 'Counterspaces', which offer opportunities to negotiate and resist exclusionary norms, are central to the wellbeing of subordinated people (Vo, 2021). The experience of resistance also shows how leisure and activism are not mutually exclusive categories but intimately connected and can reinforce each other and make leisure a political space for social change and justice (Gotfredsen et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2018; Glover, 2015; Yuen and Johnson, 2017).

It is worth noticing some limitations of this study. Leisure was not the specific focus when data was collected. Rather, the aim was developed based on results emerging from the interviews. However, this could also be speaking to its significance for a more encompassing understanding of the mental health of trans youth. Further, intersecting social positions and health inequities, such as class and racialization needs to be considered in relation to leisure and trans youth. In this study, certain perspectives and narratives are missing since few of the participants had, for example, experience of being racialized.

The complex but important nature of leisure spaces brought forward in this study can further research on the diversity of trans youth experiences and significance of leisure for mental health and wellbeing. It adds to the understanding on how cisnormativity shapes and restricts (access to) spaces of leisure for trans youth, at the same time as it centralizes the narratives and experiences of trans youth within the field of leisure. The findings are relevant for policy and practice work in creating, sustaining, and supporting leisure for trans youth in ways that are spatially inclusive, safe, and promote young trans people's mental health and wellbeing.

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