

IT STARTS WITH A FEELING

TIMING AND PROCESSES OF COMING TO GENDER DIVERSE IDENTITY

Molly Speechley^a, Dr Bonnie Barber^a, Dr Melanie Zimmer-Gembeck^a, Dr Jaimee Stuart^b, and Dr Riley Scott^c

^aGriffith University, ^bUnited Nations University, ^cUniversity of Southern Queensland

Background

Narratives of gender diverse identity often feature nascency – the belief that gender diverse people will have experienced some sense of ‘otherness’ since they were very young – and these narratives are reified in several prominent gender diverse development frameworks and standards of care documents. Emerging research disputes this, however, finding that many gender diverse people do not experience otherness until later developmental junctures: puberty, high school, or later life. Further, growing societal anxieties that exposure to concepts of gender diverse identity may confuse young people’s relationship with gender have begun to complicate conversations about gender diversity. Building upon a previous study that synthesised the vast qualitative literature regarding how gender diverse identity forms, this study explored the questions:

- **When do binary-aligned and non-binary gender diverse people begin to feel unease about gender?**
- **When do they first become exposed to gender diversity?**
- **When do they internalise their gender diverse identity?**

Method & Participants

A survey was developed exploring the developmental and life experiences of gender diverse peoples, predicated on findings from an earlier study that sought to reconceptualise the identity development processes of gender diverse peoples through qualitative synthesis. Developed with community input, this survey was distributed online through Reddit, Discord, and X (née Twitter) in the Summer of 2022. Utilising a snowball sampling approach, 175 complete surveys were submitted ($M_{age} = 28.86$, $SD = 9.5$) by 83 non-binary and 92 binary-aligned gender diverse people, across a broad range of identifiers. The majority of the participants were Australian ($n = 146$), and did not identify as an ethnic minority ($n = 165$).

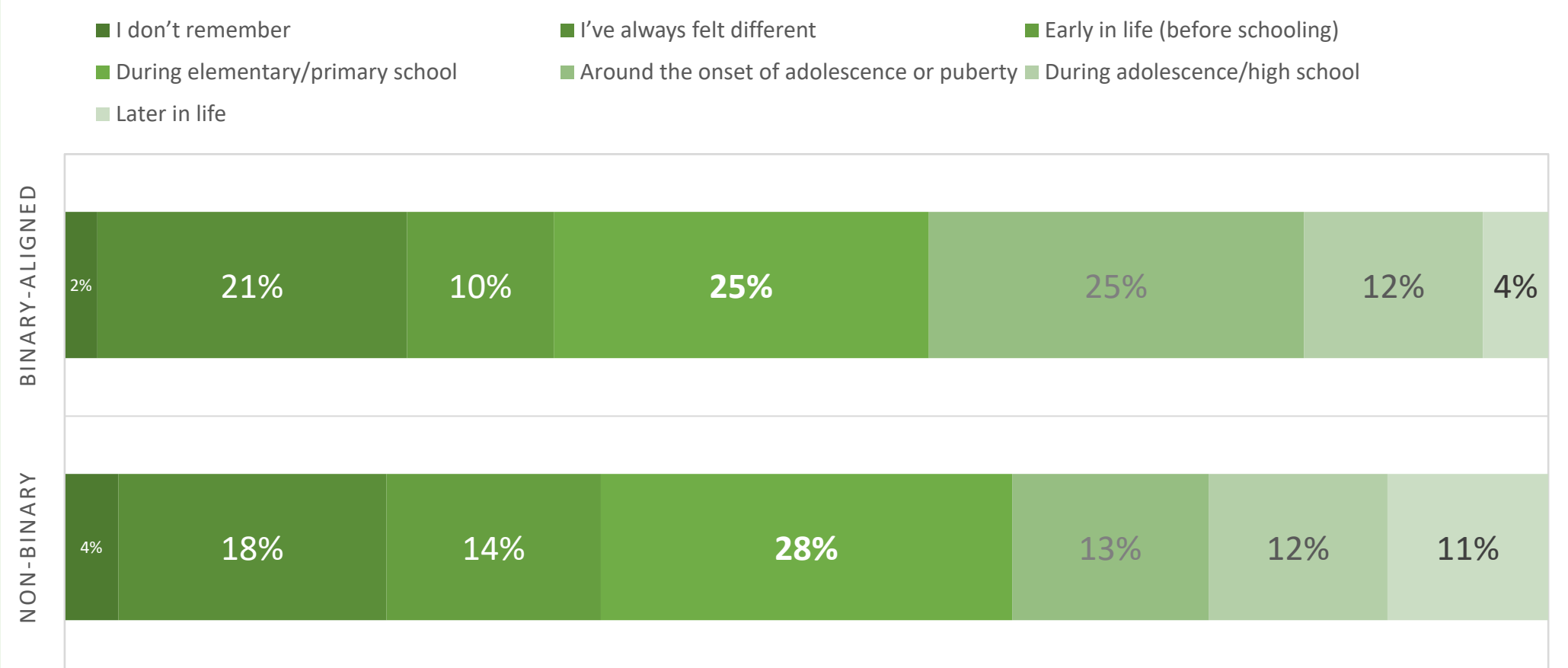
Survey questions were broad, and attempted to quantitatively isolate moments of understanding regarding gender diverse identity, and the unique processes that occurred that enabled identification with gender diverse identity. These questions included the emergence of unease regarding gender, exposure to concepts of gender diversity, and the role medical and allied health practitioners played in coming to identification.

Results

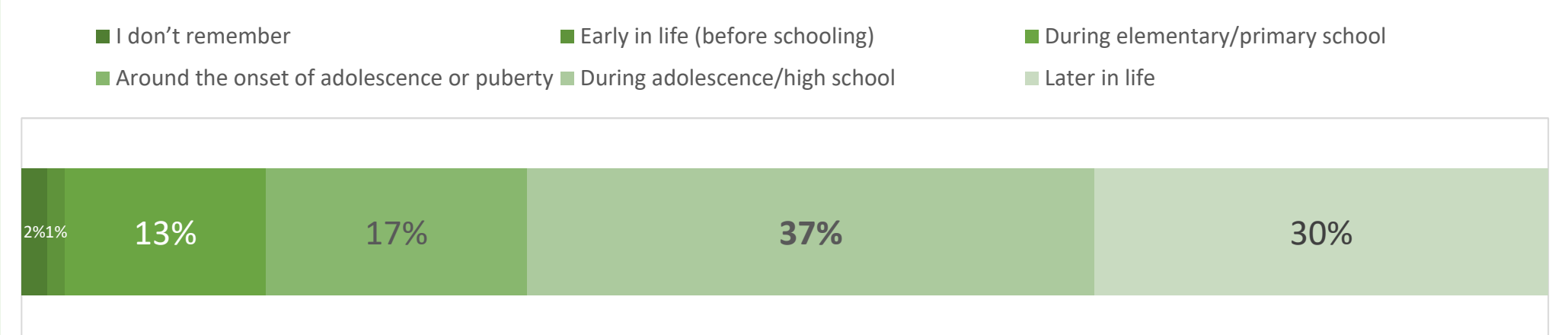
While roughly 33% of the sample maintained they had felt gender unease since very early in life or always ($n = 59$), most of the sample reported this feeling emerging later – during primary school ($n = 46$), at the onset of puberty ($n = 34$), or later (high school, $n = 21$; later $n = 13$).

Exposure to concepts of gender diversity generally occurred much later, during high school ($n = 65$) or beyond ($n = 52$). Most did not cite immediate identification with gender diversity, however, with the majority taking several years, or decades, to internalise gender diverse identity as an explanation for feelings of unease ($n = 114$). For these participants, it was felt that gender diversity simply wasn’t an option available to them ($n = 94$), and only came to identify as gender diverse during high school ($n = 47$) or later in life ($n = 96$).

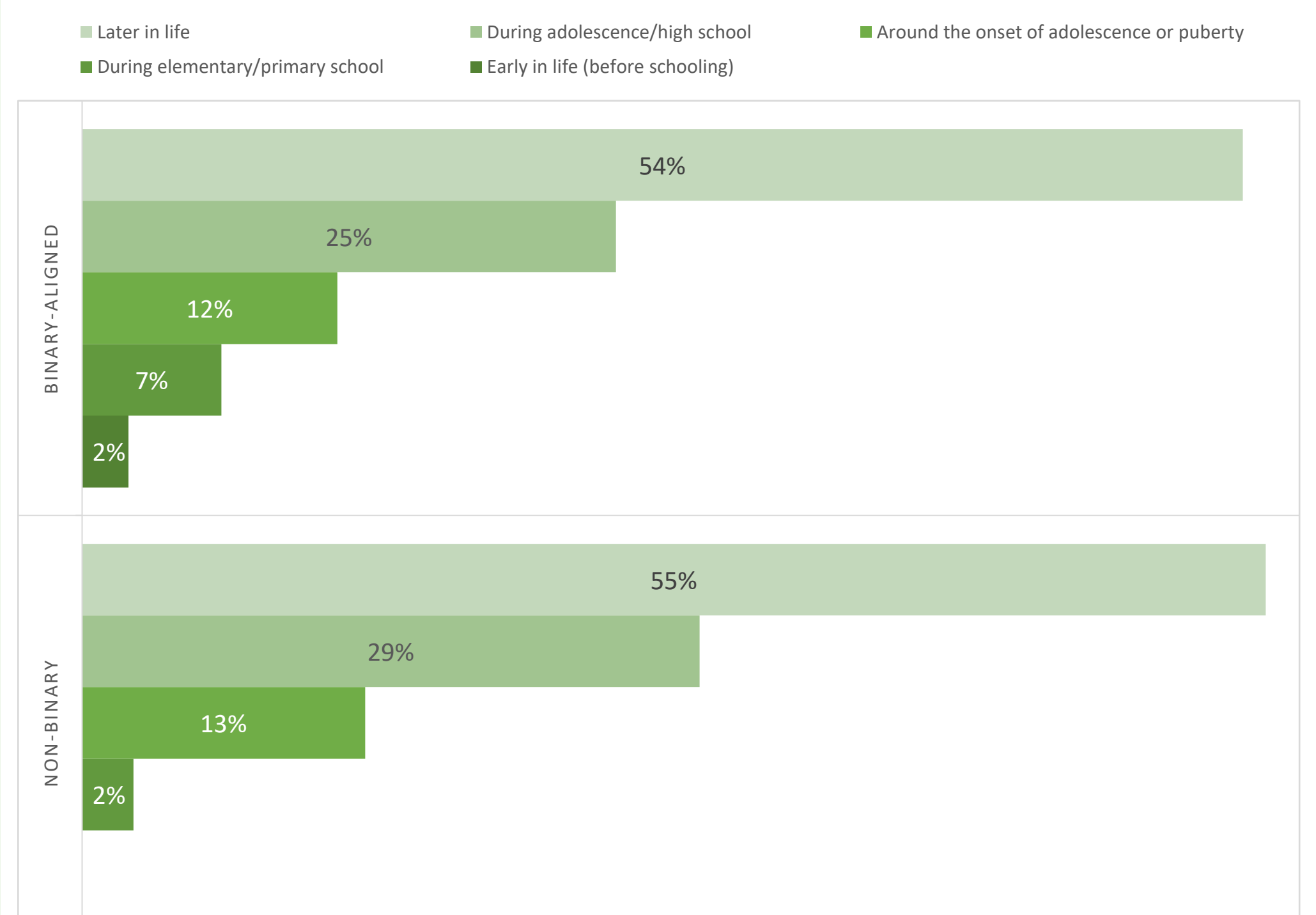
AGE OF EMERGENCE OF 'FEELING DIFFERENT'



AGE OF EXPOSURE TO GENDER DIVERSE CONCEPTS



AGE OF IDENTIFICATION WITH GENDER DIVERSE IDENTITY



Ψ Pathways to and through gender diverse identity cannot be constrained to notions that patients ‘just knew’, from a very young age. Feelings of difference emerge as individuals age through developmental milestones that affect their relationship with gender.

Ψ Many reported experiencing many years between exposure and identification– in most cases, exposure to concepts preceded identification with gender diversity by years, or decades.

Ψ Practitioners are advised to abandon the notion that gender diverse patients will present with similar pathways to gender diverse identity, and communicate to patients that they consider all narratives of gender diverse identity to be valid, and legitimate.



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