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**On Gender-Inclusive Language and Its Opponents' Motivations**

Ivo van Lemmen

Department of Psychology, Utrecht University – Utrecht

Bachelor's Research: Social, Health & Organisational Psychology (200500402)

Miriam Wickham MSc

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**Abstract**

Gender-inclusive language has become increasingly visible in recent times – due to growing gender diversity – yet it is met with widespread criticism. To build on the existing categorization of criticism against gender-inclusive language, the purpose of this study was to identify underlying psychological mechanisms of this criticism. As such, online surveys were distributed to a sample of Dutch participants ( $N = 117$ ). The resulting data was analyzed with a multiple regression analysis, MANOVA and a mediation analysis. Biological essentialism and precariousness of gender identity were identified as important predictors of negative attitudes towards gender-inclusive initiatives. Inclusion of a framing variable during the surveys resulted in null findings; implications for nudging and recommendations for future research on threat and gender essentialism are discussed.

*Keywords:* gender-inclusive language, gender essentialism, fear of gender identity loss, precariousness of gender identity, system justification, gender identification, freedom of speech.

### **On Gender-Inclusive Language and Its Opponents' Motivations**

Gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught.

—Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*

In recent times, gender-inclusive language has become increasingly visible throughout society. Various Dutch organizations have begun replacing gendered terms, in order to accommodate all of their clients or customers. The Government of Amsterdam, for example, now encourages employees to use greetings such as “Dear attendees,” as opposed to the gendered “Ladies and gentlemen” (NOS, 2017). The reason these organizations are doing so, is that gender diversity has been increasing, or at least becoming more visible.

The binary gender system, in which people identify either as male or female, is becoming increasingly redundant. Gender, when used in this thesis, refers to the self-categorization into cultural gender identities like male, female or non-binary – a separate process from the biological categorization into sexes (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020). When it comes to the Netherlands, Kuyper and Wijzen (2014) gathered a sample in which either gender ambivalence or gender incongruency was reported by 5.7% of people who were assigned male at birth (AMAB) and 4% of people assigned female at birth (AFAB).

Gender identities that differ from the binary norm are widely criticized and berated (Truszczynski et al., 2020; Vergoossen et al., 2020). Research on gender-related criticism in the Netherlands is scarce. However, using a representative Dutch sample of 2734 participants, a private research bureau found that only 38% of participants expressed understanding for people who do not want to be seen as male or female (Kamphuis, 2021). The stigmatization and lack of understanding around gender can result in distress for those who do not identify with either of the traditional genders (Meyer, 2003; Skidmore et al., 2006). This distress can take the form of

poor mental well-being (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995), participation in risk behavior (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002) or even suicidality (Plöderl & Fartacek, 2009).

Gender-inclusive initiatives (GII) played a central role in this research, as they form one of the more straightforward ways of accommodating various gender identities. Other initiatives, such as the installment of gender-neutral bathrooms, raise questions surrounding privacy, safety and hygiene (Blumell et al., 2019); in order to build foundational knowledge, it seems reasonable to start out by focusing on simpler initiatives, such as gender-inclusive language.

Recent research on gender-inclusive language tends to focus mainly on analyzing and categorizing different problems and sources of criticism (Vergoossen et al., 2020; Zimman, 2017). Though this categorization helps with theory building, it does not necessarily determine if the found relationships correspond with real-world data on a larger scale. As such, the current research took a different approach – an experimental one, to examine the effect that occurs when participants are exposed to news coverage of gender-inclusive language. In doing so, the goal was to highlight (potential) relationships between exposure and attitude. Additionally, several psychological predictors of negative attitudes towards gender-inclusive initiatives were analyzed. Deeper knowledge of these mechanisms could contribute to the effort of making public spaces more inclusive and welcoming to all. Next, the criticism against gender-inclusive language will be discussed; analyzing the content of the criticism may make it easier to understand the underlying thought processes.

### **Categories of Criticism Against Gender-Inclusive Language**

The present study was designed based on pre-existing categorization of criticism against gender-inclusive initiatives. Vergoossen et al. (2020) have identified four categories of criticism against gender-inclusive language. These categories are as follows: (A) Defending the Linguistic

Status Quo, (B) Sexism and Cisgenderism, (C) Diminishing the Issue and Its Proponents, and (D) Distractor in Communication. These categories are relevant to the structure of this paper, as the criticism in these categories reveals the psychological motivations that were measured in the present study, such as the fear of losing one's gender identity.

Category A mainly revolves around tradition and the so-called status quo bias: people react more positively to things that are already well-established, while changes to that status quo are seen as destabilizing (Jost et al., 2004; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Critics in category B argue from the majority standpoint of either the male or the cisgender identity. This criticism takes the form of statements such as: "I don't see that a few hurt people should change language" or "I don't see the need for a gender-neutral pronoun, because biologically you are either a man or a woman" (Vergoossen et al., 2020). Category C is divided into arguments focusing on hostility and ridicule, arguments focusing on freedom of speech, and arguments denying the importance of the issue (Vergoossen et al., 2020). Finally, category D revolves around the idea that gender-neutral language is seen as a political statement. Therefore, many see it as a distractor in communication, resulting in statements like: "The reader will get stuck on the use of [gender-neutral words] and it takes focus from the rest of what one is trying to say/write" (Vergoossen et al., 2020).

The literature mentions additional overarching sources of criticism against gender-inclusive initiatives, which may not fall into any of these categories. Most of these were excluded from this paper, however, because they are less relevant to language-related initiatives; gender-inclusive language usually does not directly alter the level of physical safety in public spaces. This leaves little room for critics who aim to, say, protect vulnerable groups from harassment or assault.

Though the aforementioned categories do not directly offer explanations of the psychological processes that cause the criticism, they do provide a useful framework through which to view other literature. The first three categories correspond well with existing psychological literature on gender; the fourth mainly focuses on the effectivity of communication, so it is less relevant. As such, the first three categories will be used to structure the rest of this review.

### **Analyzing Category A: System Justification and Gender Essentialism**

In category A, Vergoossen et al. (2020) included all ideas that revolved around upholding the status quo – in other words, upholding the current system. The criticism in category A is closely related to the psychological concept of system justification, which was measured in the present study. System justification refers to all behavior – often subconscious – which rationalizes or legitimizes the continued existence of the current social order (Jost et al., 2004). One possible reason why people engage in this behavior, according to Kay et al. (2002), is that they like to believe the system they live in is fair and just, in order to prevent cognitive dissonance. Additionally, the use of stereotyping in system justification appears to have several benefits for the individual: it establishes a strong sense of identity, both individually and as a member of groups. This, in turn, may lead to a stronger sense of belonging and increased self-esteem (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

The binary gender system is one of the systems people aim to conserve for these reasons. This is reflected in the literature; Jost and Kay (2005) connect the concept of system justification to the tendency to protect and justify traditional views on gender – such as the strong presence of gender roles. Supposedly, within the context of system justification, these views are protected because they are seen as fair and just. Additionally, gender stereotypes inform the perception of

the self (Tobin et al., 2010), so the effort to preserve gender stereotypes could also be seen as a form of self-preservation. This might explain why gender-inclusive initiatives – which blur the lines between male and female – can trigger negative emotions; those who strongly identify with their gender feel threatened when their gender identity is questioned (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). To evaluate this connection between strongly binary gender identities and negative attitudes towards GII, it was measured in the present study.

The idea of gender system justification begs the question: what kind of ideology is used to defend the current gender system? A possible answer is found in the concept of gender essentialism. Essentialism, which was originally a philosophical concept, is the belief that things possess a set of fixed characteristics (or ‘essence’), which makes them what they are (Gelman, 2004; Stone, 2004). This concept was then applied to gender; the resulting concept, gender essentialism, refers to the belief that different genders are also characterized by a set of fixed traits – which are often biological in nature (Smiler & Gelman, 2008; Witt, 2010). In practice, this generally means gender essentialists implicitly reject gender-nonconformity or gender-fluidity, since they believe the fixed characteristics that make up one’s gender cannot be changed (Witt, 2010).

As expected, then, high levels of gender essentialism are known to strengthen one’s use of gender stereotypes (Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004), and it strengthens the belief that gender inequality is justifiable or inevitable (Morton et al., 2009). As for system justification, essentialist beliefs are connected to positive views of legislation and customs that reinforce the traditional gender binary, such as laws that prohibit transgender people from accessing bathrooms that correspond with their gender identities (Roberts et al., 2017). The interaction between system justification and gender essentialism is cyclical, according to Saguy et al.

(2021): essentialist views of gender increase the prevalence of gender-based sorting in society, and these gender distinctions then intensify existing essentialist views, resulting in a cycle. In conclusion, a connection between system justification, gender essentialism and negative attitudes towards gender-inclusive initiatives is to be expected. As such, this connection was measured in the present study.

### **Analyzing Category B: Precarious (Wo)manhood and Fear of Gender Identity Loss**

The criticism in category B revolves around the binary, cisgender perspective. Analysis of this category is important, as this criticism is the reason why precariousness of gender identity and fear of gender identity loss were included in this study. It is not hard to see why this category was created: several studies point to strong binary gender identities as a predictor of negative attitudes towards gender-inclusive initiatives (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015; McMinn et al., 1990; Rubin et al., 1994). This relationship may be explained by looking into the fear of losing one's identity. Foundational to this fear is the belief that identity *can* be lost in the first place. When this belief is present, we refer to the identity as precarious (Leddy-Owen, 2014; Vandello et al., 2008). The precariousness of participants' gender identity was measured in the current study, as it was expected to correlate with one's fear of gender identity loss.

To understand the fear of identity loss, one must identify what is at stake when a cisgender and binary identity is lost. The literature consistently mentions privilege as an important motivator for maintaining one's identity or social position (Enke, 2012; Fischer, 2017; Kearns et al., 2017). A privileged group, according to Day et al. (2003), is a group that exists in social, political, and economic contexts that were built around the values, norms and behaviors of that specific group. Because of this, the group excels in the system. This success is often attributed to the adeptness of the group itself, as opposed to the fact that the contexts (and thus



the odds of succeeding) are biased in their favor. In the case of gender, cisgender people experience a position of status and privilege, as a large part of our culture is built around a cisgender and binary worldview (Gamarel et al., 2014; Kennedy, 2018). This power, however, is not fixed or permanent. Systems can change, and so can social dynamics. According to status characteristics theory, status is a fluid social construct that is granted to an individual by others (Karakowsky et al., 2020). Consequently, it can also be revoked. This instability of status as a source of power is considered a natural part of social hierarchies (Cabral & de Almeida, 2020), so it can be assumed to be part of the societal gender hierarchy as well. Naturally, status instability may be perceived as a threat by those with status.

As for gender, the threat of losing one's status as male or female consists of multiple sub-threats. Notable sub-threats are the distinctiveness threat, in which different groups risk becoming so similar that individuals lose their unique identity, and the system threat, in which the entire status system is destabilized (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020). These particular threats are notable, because they will be relevant in the discussion of the outcomes of our experiment. Each of these sub-threats lead to different defensive responses, such as strengthened essentialism (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020).

Considering this sense of threat, it is not hard to see why people with strong binary identities may respond negatively to the system-wide shift that gender-inclusive language brings about; these people are in a position of power, and they are afraid to lose it if the status quo is challenged. To gather evidence regarding this relationship between strong binary gender identities and negative attitudes towards GII, it was measured in the present study. Additionally, what is still unclear in the literature is the exact relationship between the belief in the precariousness of gender identity and the fear of gender identity loss. One would assume the

belief in precariousness precedes (and thus mediates) the fear, but the literature does not offer conclusive evidence at this time. As such, this relationship was measured in the present study.

### **Analyzing Category C: Freedom of Speech and Fear of Censorship**

Category C is related to one's support for freedom of speech, which was measured in this study. The criticism in category C means to invalidate gender-inclusive initiatives and those who support them. This is attempted, for example, by arguing that the initiatives limit the freedom of speech (Vergoossen et al., 2020), which is constitutionally protected in most Western countries (Barendt, 2005). This line of reasoning is met with criticism, however, as limiting the freedom of speech through censorship would be detrimental to the cause of minority groups: many progressive movements – such as the fight for women's rights – relied heavily on being able to express ideas freely (Strossen, 1995). Moreover, censorship and speech restrictions are ineffective ways of limiting discrimination, as silencing harmful language does not automatically remove the underlying discriminatory ideology (Kelley, 1996; Strossen, 1995). As such, it would not make sense for minority groups to push for speech restrictions. It is worth noting that gender-inclusive language is not restrictive in nature; these initiatives encourage the use of neutral language as an alternative to gendered terms, yet they do not ban the latter.

Still, critics who fear the loss of their freedom of speech persist. Part of this fear can be explained by theories that were discussed previously: censorship and restricted speech would make it harder to express and strengthen one's identity, which could then elicit a sense of threat. Another explanation for the fear of censorship is rooted in pre-existing gender inequality. According to Kaufman and Lindquist (1995), gender-neutral language doesn't acknowledge the social, economic and political disenfranchisement of women. They argue that a clear gender division is needed in order to make sure women can tell their own stories. The importance of

sharing these stories is highlighted in previous research on the properties of gender identities: Gurin & Townsend (1984) found that the sense of a common fate – as shared by women – was one of the strongest aspects of the female identity.

Regardless of the counterarguments, the fear of censorship is clearly present in the literature and in real-world criticism of gender-inclusive initiatives (Vergoossen et al., 2020). As such, individuals who strongly call for the protection of freedom of speech are expected to report negative attitudes towards gender-inclusive initiatives. This expectation was tested in the present study.

### **The Present Study**

What is left, then, is to find a way to analyze how people respond when they are exposed to gender-inclusive language. One well-established way to do so is through framing. Framing is a technique used to change the context participants depend on while processing information (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

By using gender-inclusive initiatives as the frame in an experiment, it would be possible to subconsciously encourage participants to use their corresponding mental schema. This would then change their response, depending on the pre-existing mental schema of the participant; if the participant already had a positive view of gender-inclusive initiatives, being exposed to the frame should make them judge GII more positively in the experiment, whereas more negative judging of GII would be expected if the participant already had a negative view of GII. With the framing technique in mind, along with the expectations stated in previous sections, the following hypotheses were formulated:

#### ***Hypothesis 1***

Gender system justification, gender essentialism, strong binary gender identities, fear of gender identity loss, and strong support for freedom of speech predict negative attitudes towards gender-inclusive initiatives.

### ***Hypothesis 2***

Participants who are exposed to a framing article on gender-inclusive language report different attitudes on gender-inclusive initiatives than a control group.

### ***Hypothesis 3***

Participants who are exposed to a framing article on gender-inclusive language report a different level of fear of identity loss than a control group.

### ***Hypothesis 4***

The effect of framing on the fear of identity loss is mediated by the belief in the precariousness of gender identities.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

A power analysis was performed in G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009), based partly on the effect size ( $f^2 = .09$ ) found in a previous study (Haenen, 2020), and partly on the design of the current study, which is an experimental design with the following independent variables: gender system justification, gender essentialism, binary gender identities, fear of gender identity loss, and support for freedom of speech. Furthermore, the rating of the NS-article about its language-related GII, age, being part of the LGBTQI+ community, identifying as feminist, and political orientation were explored as subsidiary variables. The power analysis indicated that for a power of .80, a total of 127 participants was required. In total, the sample contained 117 participants. As such, an additional post-hoc power analysis was performed, resulting in a power of .95

(Cohen, 1988). In total, 115 Dutch participants participated, of which 83 were women, 32 were men, and two participants were non-binary. The participants' ages ranged from eighteen to 68 years old ( $M = 27.67$ ,  $SD = 11.60$ ). In addition, 28 people reported being part of the LGBTQ+ community and 79 identified as a feminist. The participants were recruited from Utrecht University's psychology department and via different social media platforms, such as Facebook (<https://facebook.com>).

### **Measures**

Next, the used questionnaires will be described. Each questionnaire was measured on a seven point Likert scale (see Appendix A) and all English scales were translated into Dutch.

#### ***Fear of Identity Loss***

To measure participants' fear of losing their gender identity, eight items were used. The scale was based on a scale as used in a previous student thesis (Haenen, 2021). The scale was originally modified based on the article of Vandello et al. (2008). Based on reliability analyses, two items were removed, resulting in a scale consisting of six items, including "Ik heb het gevoel minder 'echt' man of vrouw te zijn" ( $\alpha = .798$ ; see appendix B).

#### ***Gender Essentialism***

To measure participants' beliefs on whether gender differences are fundamental or not, either biologically or socially, 15 items from Kim (2021) were used. The biological subscale consists of eleven items, including "Het gender van een persoon wordt bepaald door hun genen" ( $\alpha = .880$ ). Because of weak reliability scores, the original social subscale was shortened from ten to four items, including "Je opvoeding bepaalt in grotere mate wie je bent dan je huidige sociale omgeving" ( $\alpha = .666$ ; see appendix C).

#### ***Freedom of Speech***

To measure how strongly participants feel about freedom of speech, we used six items from a scale as introduced by Rojas et al. (1996), originally consisting of sixteen items. The new six-item scale included “Iedereen zou volledig vrij moeten zijn om hun eigen mening te verkondigen” ( $\alpha = .715$ ; see appendix D).

### ***Gender Identification***

This scale is used to measure to what extent participants identify with either one of the binary genders (Wickham et al., 2021). Items included “Vrouwen zijn een belangrijk representatie van wie ik ben” (female subscale;  $\alpha = .905$ ), and “Ik identificeer mij als man” (male subscale;  $\alpha = .892$ ; see appendix E).

### ***Gender System Justification***

The scale measures to what extent people believe the binary system is equal and just (Jost & Kay, 2005). The items were modified to apply to Dutch society. The eight-item scale included “Iedereen in Nederland heeft een eerlijke kans op rijkdom en geluk” ( $\alpha = .819$ ; see appendix F).

### ***Precariousness of Gender Identity***

This scale measures if participants believe that manhood and womanhood are statuses that need continual social proof and validation. Eight of the original 32 items, introduced by Vandello et al. (2008), were used. Items included “Het is gemakkelijk voor en man om zijn positie als man te verliezen” ( $\alpha = .780$ ; see appendix G).

### ***General Attitudes Towards Gender-Inclusive Initiatives***

To measure participants’ attitudes regarding the implementation of gender-inclusive initiatives, a scale from a previous student thesis was used (Haenen, 2021). Fifteen of the original seventeen items were used. Items included “Ik vind gender-inclusieve initiatieven een positief streven” ( $\alpha = .946$ ; see appendix H).

## **Materials**

An excerpt from an article on GII was presented to participants in Qualtrics as a way of framing the survey. The article, titled “Beste reizigers...”, was posted by railway company Nederlandse Spoorwegen to announce (and comment on) the decision to start all future announcements with “Dear travelers”, as opposed to the former, gendered greeting: “Ladies and gentlemen’ (Middelkoop, 2017; see appendix I).

## **Procedure**

People participated voluntarily by taking a survey in Qualtrics. They were first asked to read and digitally sign the informed consent form. Participants were assigned to one of two order conditions (experimental: article shown first, or control: article shown last). In the experimental condition, participants saw the article at the very beginning of the experiment, before answering all questions. In the control condition, participants saw the article at the very end, after answering all questions. Regardless of condition, directly after being shown the article, participants rated how positively or negatively they felt about the article. In addition, an attention check was added in the text of the article, which asked the participants to write “check” in the comment box at the end of the article.

The scales were presented in the following (fixed) order: fear of gender identity loss, gender essentialism, support for freedom of speech, gender identification, gender system justification, precariousness of gender identity, and general attitude towards gender-inclusive initiatives. All statements in the questionnaires are rated on a seven-point Likert-scale, ranging from “Totally agree” to “Totally disagree”. Another attention check was included in the precariousness of gender identity scale, which asked participants to select “Totally disagree” for that statement. In addition, at the beginning of the gender essentialism scale, a short but

complete definition of the term ‘*opvoeding*’ (upbringing) was added to avoid confusion about this concept (see Appendix J). Lastly, demographics were collected. Participants were asked for their sex, gender, age and political orientation. In addition, they were asked if they identify as Dutch, if they identify as feminist, and if they are part of the LGBTQ+ community (see Appendix K). After finishing the survey, participants were debriefed. They were provided information on the true aim of the research and were requested to submit their data. Finally, participants were given the chance to withdraw their data from further analyses, and/or leave their personal information to receive credits.

### **Data analysis**

For the data analysis, all scores on the survey were first imported into *IBM SPSS Statistics 27*. Data from participants who did not complete the survey were deleted, and for scales that included reversed items, these items were recoded. Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis was performed, to investigate the influence of the main independent variables – gender system justification, gender essentialism, binary gender identities, fear of gender identity loss, and support for freedom of speech – on the dependent variable, attitudes towards GII. In addition, the PROCESS-plugin for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) was used to explore a possible mediation between precariousness of gender identity on fear of gender identity loss. Lastly, an ANOVA was performed, to test for an order effect between the experimental and control group regarding their attitudes towards GII.

### **Data preparation**

Before starting the data analysis, the data was prepared by recoding reverse coded items and calculating scale scores, and the assumptions were checked. The dependent variables showed insignificant Levene’s tests: outcomes showed equal variances for both fear of gender identity



loss ( $F(1,115) = .355, p = .553$ ), and general attitude towards GII ( $F(1,115) = .010, p = .922$ ). ).

In addition, measurements levels were checked for all variables in the *SPSS* variable view.

Furthermore, the assumption of linearity was tested by checking scatter-plots for each variable.

This assumption was met. Lastly, the assumption of multicollinearity was met. The variance inflation factor (VIF), a measure of the amount of multicollinearity in a set of multiple regression variables, was within the acceptable range of 1-10 for all variables and the tolerance scores were all above 0.1 (Midi et al., 2010). Initially, it seemed as if the assumption of normality was violated in the scores on general attitude towards GII. However, the skewness ( $\gamma_1 = -.548$ ) and kurtosis ( $\gamma_2 = -.727$ ) of the distribution were within acceptable parameters (Blanca et al., 2013).

Some scores appeared to be extreme, but none of them exceeded the cut-off point of three standard deviations from the mean upon closer inspection (Knorr & Ng, 1998). In addition, Box' M Test of equality of variance is significant ( $p = .046$ ). However, because no significance was found in the MANOVA, this will form no problem for the found results (Hans-Vaughn, 2016). Lastly, a factor analysis was done for the social essentialism subscale. Initially, the reliability requirements were not met. However, after testing the shortened version for reliability, the social essentialism scale showed to be reliable and was used in this study.

## **Results**

### **Predictors of Negative Attitudes Towards GII**

To test whether the variables gender system justification, gender essentialism, binary gender identities, fear of gender identity loss, and support for freedom of speech are significant predictors of negative attitudes towards GII, as hypothesized, a multiple regression analysis was run. The variables age, gender, whether somebody considers themselves Dutch, LGBTQ+ or a feminist, political orientation (both left-right and progressive-conservative), and rating of the NS

article were also entered in the regression to explore the effects. The rating of the NS article ( $B = .202, p = .014$ ), biological essentialism ( $B = -4.334, p = .000$ ) and precariousness of gender identity ( $B = -2.159, p = .034$ ) were found to significantly predict the attitude towards GII ( $p < .05$ ). Other variables were insignificant ( $p \geq .05$ ). Notably, while insignificant, whether somebody considers themselves a feminist could be an interesting variable to include in future studies ( $B = .146, p = .059$ ). For an overview of all the results from the multiple regression analysis, see Appendix L. The variance explained solely by the significant predictors was 60.6 percent ( $R^2 = .606, F(3,113) = 9.981, p < .01$ ). This is partly in line with the hypothesis: biological essentialism negatively predicted the attitude towards GII. The other main independent variables, however, were found to be insignificant predictors. This suggests that these variables may not influence attitudes towards GII.

### **Precariousness of Gender Identity and Fear of Gender Identity Loss**

To test whether there is an effect of condition on fear of gender identity loss, mediated by the belief in the precariousness of gender identities, PROCESS was used. No mediation was found. The total effect was not significant ( $p = .386$ ) and the direct effect was not significant ( $p = .418$ ). This suggests that precariousness of gender identities does not mediate the relationship between framing and the fear of gender identity loss.

### **Effect of Framing Condition**

A MANOVA was performed to assess whether those in the experimental condition, where participants were exposed to the frame ahead of taking the questionnaires, would report a stronger fear of gender identity loss and more negative attitudes on GII than the control group. There was no statistically significant difference in fear of gender identity loss or negative attitudes on GII based on experimental condition ( $F(2,114) = .798, p = .453$ ; Wilk's  $\Lambda = .986$ ,

partial  $\eta^2 = .014$ ). No follow-up tests were performed, since there was no significant difference. These results suggest that reading an article about GII does not lead to higher levels of fear of gender identity loss or more negative attitudes towards GII.

### **Discussion**

The results provided limited support for our hypothesis regarding the predictors of attitudes towards GII, and no support for our hypotheses regarding the effects of framing and the mediating role of precarious (wo)manhood. Of the hypothesized variables – gender system justification, gender essentialism, strong binary gender identities, fear of gender identity loss, precariousness of gender identity, and strong support for freedom of speech – only biological essentialism and precariousness of gender identity were significantly related to attitudes towards GII. Additionally, a significant relationship was found between the participants' rating of the NS article and their attitude towards GII. The inclusion of an experimental condition, an article which served as a form of framing before the survey, did not result in significant effects on attitudes towards GII or fear of gender identity loss. Lastly, precariousness of gender identity did not mediate the effect of framing on fear of gender identity loss.

### **Predictors of General Attitude Towards GII**

In this section, four notable findings regarding our first hypothesis will be discussed: 1) biological essentialism was significantly related to negative attitudes towards GII, while social essentialism was not, 2) precariousness of gender identity was significantly related to negative attitudes towards GII, while fear of gender identity loss was not, 3) strong support for freedom of speech, strong binary gender identities, and system justification were not significantly related to negative attitudes towards GII, and 4) participants' rating of the NS initiative was significantly related to their attitude towards GII.

First, the relationship between negative attitudes towards GII and biological essentialism that was found in the present study corresponds with existing research. Past research links gender essentialism to increased usage of gender stereotypes (Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004) and to increased support of customs that enforce the traditional gender binary (Morton et al., 2009), so it makes sense that initiatives that deviate from these customs are viewed negatively.

Social essentialism, however, was not significantly related to negative attitudes towards GII in the present study. This finding is surprising; one would assume that believing in one form of essentialism would be related to believing in all forms of essentialism, as the underlying belief is always the same: things (or people) have fixed characteristics (Gelman, 2004). As such, it would make sense for individuals to either be a social *and* biological essentialist, or to be neither. In other words: scores should have been similar for both types of essentialism, meaning that there would not have been a difference between the two. This makes it unclear why the inclusion of a social essentialism scale resulted in a null finding while biological essentialism was such a strong predictor. A possible cause is that the social essentialism scale used in the present study may not have been adequate; due to poor reliability, the scale was shortened. The fact that some items were removed may have affected the construct validity of the scale – as some aspects of social essentialism went unmeasured – thus resulting in unreliable scores. Alternatively, the difference could have been caused by the fact that people perceive biological and social characteristics differently; biological traits are more tangible and are thus often seen as more immutable than social factors, which are generally more fluid or abstract (Pinker, 2004). As such, social essentialism may simply be less prevalent than its biological counterpart in general, as it is harder to essentialize abstract social factors, such as gender.

Second, an unexpected finding was that precariousness of gender identity was related to negative attitudes towards GII, while fear of gender identity loss was not. The two concepts are closely related, as both deal with the mutability of identity and status (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020; Vandello et al., 2008). A possible distinction between these concepts may be found in the types of threat GII can trigger in people. Negative attitudes towards GII that de-gender language (by replacing gendered terms with neutral options, such as replacing “Dear ladies and gentlemen” with “Dear passengers”) were previously thought to be related to distinctiveness threat (Morgenroth et al., 2021). However, fear of gender identity loss, which is related to the threat of losing one’s distinctiveness compared to an out-group (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020), was not significantly connected to negative attitudes towards GII in our statistical model. In contrast, precariousness of gender identity *was* significant. The latter is related to system threat, as precariousness of identity pertains to the realization that the general gender system is shifting and becoming more fluid. This upsets the status quo, leading to instability and a sense of threat (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020). Going by our results, it is possible that system-based threats (and thus precariousness) play a larger role in predicting negative attitudes towards GII than individual threats (i.e. the fear of identity loss).

Third, strong binary gender identities, gender system justification, and strong support for freedom of speech were not significantly related to negative attitudes towards GII. This finding is surprising, as these relationships followed from the available theories. The widespread adoption of gender-inclusive language is still relatively new (Zimman, 2017), meaning there may not have been many opportunities to practically test these theories. This places our null findings in context; though our expectation that relationships would exist between attitude towards GII and these insignificant predictors was based on theories, empirical testing of these relationships

was not found in the literature. As such, our null findings could be interpreted as an indication that these theories do not fit with real-world data, and alternative theories should be considered.

If system-based threats are indeed more important for predicting negative attitudes towards GII than individual threats, it could explain why strong binary gender identities were not a significant predictor of negative attitudes towards GII; a system-wide threat to the status quo is felt by everyone within the system, regardless of gender identity, which removes this variable from the equation. The null finding for gender system justification in relation to attitudes towards GII may have been caused by the fact that the scale used to measure gender system justification focused solely on the fairness of Dutch society as a whole, as opposed to focusing on gender specifically. This broadness left room for participants to interpret the items in many different, unintended ways – the items may be interpreted to be about politics or general life satisfaction, for example. It is possible that these potential misinterpretations resulted in skewed data. Alternatively, it is possible that one's support for GII is simply independent of one's support for the current gender system. After all, one can criticize both the current system *and* the initiatives; even if somebody does not support the binary gender system, they may view the initiatives as inconvenient or distracting (Vergoossen et al., 2020). Finally, the fact that strong support for freedom of speech did not show the hypothesized relationship with attitudes towards GII could be attributed to the lack of consensus in the literature. We expected that strong supporters of freedom of speech would oppose GII, as they might feel that these initiatives limit their self-expression. What we did not take into account in our hypothesis, is that many people feel the opposite way: they believe that GII would never restrict freedom of speech, as this freedom is beneficial to minority groups. The two groups – opponents and proponents – may have balanced each other out in our sample, resulting in an eventual null finding.

Fourth, a significant relationship was found between attitudes towards GII and participants' rating of the 'Beste reizigers'-initiative by NS, which was included as a subsidiary variable. The initiative rating can be seen as a very direct measure of participants' attitudes towards GII. The fact that this rating was significantly related to our separate measure of attitudes towards GII shows convergent validity, indicating that our measure was appropriate and effective.

### **Lack of Framing and Mediation Effects**

Our second, third, and fourth hypotheses, the hypotheses that were related to the effects of framing and the mediating role of precariousness of gender identity, resulted in null findings. There are two possible reasons for this: either the effects of framing (on fear of gender identity loss and attitudes towards GII) simply do not exist in this case, or the data was affected by the fact that framing may have unintentionally occurred in both the experimental group and the control group.

If the first scenario is true, framing simply does not affect one's attitude towards GII. This would suggest that attitudes towards GII do not depend strongly on context; they would be relatively steady regardless of the frames that different settings provide. In case of the second scenario, additional research should be carried out while avoiding the same methodological flaw when it comes to framing. This flaw of the current study is that some of the questionnaires revolved around concepts such as gender identity, which are at the very least somewhat related to attitudes towards GII (Levitt, 2019). These questionnaires were presented to both the framed group and the control group. As such, it is possible that these questionnaires already presented a similar gender-related frame: the act of answering the questionnaires may have already framed participants, thus weakening the impact of the actual framing variable.

## **Implications**

The findings from the present study come with two direct implications for researchers and practitioners: biological and social essentialism should be considered separately, and environmental steering of attitudes towards GII may not be effective.

First, a notable theoretical implication of our results is that social and biological essentialism differ in their relation to attitudes towards GII. Though it is possible that this is caused by an inadequate scale, it is also possible that biological and social essentialism truly do have different effects on one's attitude towards GII. In the majority of literature on gender essentialism, the difference between social and biological essentialism is not taken into account (Skewes et al., 2018; Smiler & Gelman, 2008; Witt, 2011). The present study indicates that this distinction should be made in future theory building.

Second, environmental steering of attitudes towards GII may not be effective. The findings of the present study indicate that attitudes towards GII may not be sensitive to context, as framing did not affect them. This has implications for researchers and policy-makers alike, as it might rule out using changes in the environment as a way to steer attitudes. Changing behavior by subtly altering the environment is known as nudging, and it is a technique that has been applied to societal problems ranging from public health issues to bullying. It is used increasingly as of late – even leading to the establishment of *nudge units*, teams of government officials that specialize in this technique (Benartzi et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2018). The current study indicates that those who use or research this technique should be careful when applying it to gender inclusivity, as attitudes towards GII do not seem to be context-based and thus, nudging may not have the desired effect.

## **Limitations and recommendations**



Though the current study can help inform future research and broader decision-making, several limitations of our research should be considered. First, the generalizability of the study is impacted by its sample: participants were gathered from the researchers' own network, including a lot of students, which means it is unlikely that the sample is representative of the entirety of the Dutch population. Additionally, the sample was female-dominated, as is common in the social sciences (Dickenson et al., 2021). Though these factors appear to limit the generalizability of the present study, there are some who argue that the usage of student samples does not intrinsically pose a problem for external validity (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008; Druckman & Kam, 2011; Lupton, 2019).

Second, the selection of variables used in the analyses was not exhaustive. Examples of other variables include education, as highly educated individuals tend to be more positive towards GII (Kostenko et al., 2014; Norton & Herek, 2013). We recommend future researchers to include education and other relevant variables in their research design.

Lastly, the self-report-based methodology used in this study is prone to the social desirability bias. This is especially relevant when it comes to socially sensitive topics – such as gender inclusivity – as these topics tend to strengthen this bias (Krumpal, 2013). Additionally, as the sample was female-dominated, it is worth noting that women appear to be more susceptible to the social desirability bias than men (Dalton & Ortegren, 2011). As such, the data used in the current study may be especially susceptible to this bias. Though extensively controlling for the social desirability bias was beyond the scope of this study, it does present a clear perspective for follow-up studies: in future studies, researchers should aim to replicate our findings while avoiding socially desirable behavior in participants.

There are two main ways to do so. On the one hand, existing surveys could be expanded to include social desirability checks and indirect questioning (Jo et al., 1997; Larson, 2019). On the other hand, surveys could be combined with other forms of data collection that are not affected by social desirability. Examples of this include physiological data (Bianchin & Angrilli, 2012) and data that is collected so quickly that social desirability can only play a limited role cognitively, such as during an implicit-association test (Greenwald et al., 2009).

Additionally, follow-up studies could be conducted to further examine the interplay between social and biological essentialism, as one variable had a significant effect while the other, surprisingly, did not. The questionnaire by Kim (2021), which measures these two subtypes of essentialism, should be used in additional research, in order to investigate if the two truly differ in terms of prevalence and in terms of their influence on attitudes towards gender-inclusivity.

Moreover, the opposing views on the role gender-inclusive language plays in freedom of speech could be an interesting topic for future research. For instance, these views could be explored in qualitative interviews with proponents and opponents, in order to identify recurring themes in the debate surrounding free speech. These themes could then be used in future experimental designs, in order to examine how this debate influences public acceptance of GII.

Lastly, future studies should be conducted in order to investigate the types of threat that are related to GII. Based on the present study, we expect that system-based threats that impact the status quo are stronger predictors for negative attitudes on GII than individual threats. This distinction should be explored in additional research. One way to do so would be to use the framework by Morgenroth & Ryan (2020) develop a scale which measures the different types of

threat an individual experiences when exposed to a stimulus. This scale could then be used to analyze the threat one experiences when exposed to GII.

### **Conclusion**

As steps are taken to promote inclusion throughout the world, it is important to keep an eye on how these steps are received by the general public. As the resistance to inclusive initiatives is rooted in psychological mechanisms, this study aimed to contribute to our understanding of these mechanisms. It did so by highlighting important predictors of negative attitudes towards GII – precariousness of identity and biological essentialism. The study faced some limitations, such as socially desirable answering and a sample that decreased generalizability. Still, the insights in this study can be used to fuel follow-up studies and further public knowledge on gender inclusivity, enabling more successful inclusivity initiatives in the process.

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## Appendix A

### Instruction for the Included Scales

Every questionnaire utilizes a 7 point Likert scale. The answer options are as follows: ‘Totaal mee oneens’, ‘2’, ‘3’, ‘Neutraal’, ‘5’, ‘6’, and ‘Totaal mee eens’. Scale scores are calculated by using the mean of the item scores. See figure A1 for an example item.

#### Figure A1

*Example item as captured in Qualtrics*

	Totaal mee oneens	2	3	Neutraal	5	6	Totaal mee eens
Ik heb het gevoel dat ik mijn positie als man of vrouw verlies.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The only exception is the demographics questionnaire. These items use different answer options, which have also been added to Appendix K for clarity.

## **Appendix B**

### **Fear of Identity Loss**

1. Ik heb het gevoel dat ik mijn positie als man of vrouw verlies.
2. Ik heb het gevoel dat anderen mij vaak zien als man of als vrouw.
3. Ik heb het gevoel minder 'echt' man of vrouw te zijn.
4. Ik heb het gevoel dat mijn mannelijkheid of vrouwelijkheid van mij wordt afgenomen.
5. Ik maak mij er zorgen over dat men zich niet als man of vrouw kan identificeren, doordat de grenzen tussen de categorieën man en vrouw vervagen.
6. Ik maak mij er zorgen over dat mannen en vrouwen hun genderidentiteit niet meer kunnen uiten.
7. Ik maak mij er zorgen over dat mijn identiteit als man of vrouw niet wordt gerepresenteerd in de maatschappij.
8. Ik heb het gevoel dat er 'echte' mannen en vrouwen zijn.

## **Appendix C**

### **Gender Essentialism – Biological**

1. Genen zijn de bron van verschillen tussen de geslachten.
2. Verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen zijn met name bepaald door biologie.
3. Verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen staan al bij de geboorte vast.
4. Of iemand een man of een vrouw is, wordt bepaald door biologie.
5. Het gender van een persoon wordt bepaald door hun genen.
6. Wat voor persoon iemand is, is duidelijk afgebakend: iemand is óf vrouw, óf man.
7. Mensen kunnen zich zowel mannelijk als vrouwelijk gedragen, maar toch hebben de geslachten vaste kenmerken.
8. Gender is een spectrum en sommige mensen zijn moeilijk te categoriseren.
9. Iemands gender is moeilijk te definiëren.
10. Individuen kunnen in gedrag verschillen, maar de belangrijke verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen kunnen niet veranderd worden.
11. Zelfs de meest fundamentele verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen kunnen makkelijk veranderd worden.

### **Gender Essentialism – Social**

1. Gender en sekse zijn twee aparte dingen.
2. Je opvoeding bepaalt in grotere mate wie je bent dan je huidige sociale omgeving.
3. Een persoon die opgevoed wordt als man zal als volwassene meer overeenkomsten hebben met mannen dan met vrouwen, onafhankelijk van het gender van diegene.
4. Wat een persoon denkt en doet is grotendeels een product van hoe iemand is opgevoed.



5. Individuen die opgevoed zijn als jongens verschillen essentieel van individuen die opgevoed zijn als meisjes.
6. Je gedrag hangt meer af van je huidige genderidentiteit dan van je opvoeding.
7. Iemand die geleefd heeft als man zal het onmogelijk vinden om iemand te begrijpen die geleefd heeft als vrouw, en vice versa.
8. Hoe een individu opgevoed is, bepaalt het gedrag en de overtuigingen van dat individu.
9. De levenservaringen van een individu kunnen heel erg verschillen van de levenservaringen van anderen met hetzelfde gender.
10. Het weten van iemands gender maakt het voorspellen van zijn gedrag en gedachten gemakkelijker.

## **Appendix D**

### **Freedom of Speech**

1. Hoe omstreden een idee ook is, het moet altijd geuit kunnen worden.
2. Iedereen zou volledig vrij moeten zijn om hun eigen mening te verkondigen.
3. Het is helaas soms nodig om de vrijheid van meningsuiting van sommige groepen in te perken.
4. Vrijheid van meningsuiting is een belangrijk streven.
5. Het moet mogelijk zijn om het platform van mensen met extremistische meningen te beperken.
6. Door het beperken van meningsuiting is er minder ruimte voor debat.

## **Appendix E**

### **Gender Identification**

1. Ik identificeer me met (andere) vrouwen.
2. Ik identificeer me met (andere) mannen.
3. Vrouwen zijn een belangrijke representatie van wie ik ben.
4. Mannen zijn een belangrijke representatie van wie ik ben.
5. Ik zie mijzelf als iemand die bij de groep 'vrouwen' hoort.
6. Ik zie mijzelf als iemand die bij de groep 'mannen' hoort.
7. Ik voel me verbonden met (andere) vrouwen.
8. Ik voel me verbonden met (andere) mannen.
9. Ik identificeer me als vrouw.
10. Ik identificeer me als man.

## **Appendix F**

### **Gender System Justification**

1. De Nederlandse maatschappij is over het algemeen eerlijk.
2. Over het algemeen werkt het Nederlandse politieke systeem zoals het zou moeten werken.
3. De Nederlandse maatschappij moet radicaal geherstructureerd worden.
4. Nederland is het beste land van de wereld om in te leven.
5. Het meeste Nederlandse beleid dient het grotere goed.
6. Iedereen in Nederland heeft een eerlijke kans op rijkdom en geluk.
7. De Nederlandse maatschappij wordt elk jaar slechter.
8. De Nederlandse maatschappij is zo opgezet dat iedereen krijgt wat diegene verdient.

## **Appendix G**

### **Precariousness of Gender Identity**

1. Het is gemakkelijk voor een man om zijn positie als man te verliezen.
2. De positie van een man als ‘echte man’ is soms afhankelijk van hoe anderen hem beschouwen.
3. Het zijn van een ‘echte man’ is iets dat in twijfel kan worden getrokken.
4. Mannelijkheid is iets dat weggenomen kan worden.
5. Het is gemakkelijk voor een vrouw om haar positie als vrouw te verliezen.
6. De positie van een vrouw als ‘echte vrouw’ is soms afhankelijk van hoe anderen haar beschouwen.
7. Het zijn van een ‘echte vrouw’ is iets dat in twijfel kan worden getrokken.
8. Vrouwelijkheid is iets dat weggenomen kan worden.

## Appendix H

### General Attitude Towards Gender-Inclusive Initiatives

1. Het bouwen van een inclusieve samenleving door gender-inclusieve initiatieven vind ik relevant voor de maatschappij.
2. Het bouwen van een inclusieve samenleving door gender-inclusieve initiatieven vind ik belangrijk voor de maatschappij.
3. Het invoeren van gender-inclusieve initiatieven komt overeen met mijn normen en waarden.
4. Het invoeren van gender-inclusieve initiatieven vind ik overdreven.
5. Ik vind het goed dat er actie wordt ondernomen om een inclusieve samenleving te bouwen door middel van gender-inclusieve initiatieven.
6. Het is niet mijn verantwoordelijkheid om een inclusieve samenleving te bouwen door middel van gender-inclusieve initiatieven.
7. Ik houd mij liever buiten discussies over gender-inclusieve initiatieven.
8. Ik vind dat een gender-inclusief initiatief een vorm van aandacht zoeken is.
9. Het is volkomen belachelijk om gender-inclusieve initiatieven in te voeren.
10. Gender-inclusieve initiatieven vind ik een bedreiging voor onze samenleving.
11. Gender-inclusieve initiatieven vind ik een zorgwekkende ontwikkeling in onze samenleving.
12. Ik voel mij bedreigd door gender-inclusieve initiatieven.
13. Gender-inclusieve initiatieven baren mij zorgen.
14. Ik vind gender-inclusieve initiatieven een positief streven.

15. Ik vind gender-inclusieve initiatieven een wenselijke ontwikkeling voor onze samenleving.

## Appendix I

### NS Article: “Beste reizigers”

#### Figure I1

“Beste reizigers”, as presented in Qualtrics



Over NS / Nieuws /

## "Beste reizigers..."

28 juli 2017

### Samenvatting

Omroepbericht: „Beste dames en heren, jongens en meisjes, LGBTQIA+’ers en iedereen met een geldig vervoersbewijs.” Wij vonden het wat lang. En toch vinden we het van belang dat iedereen zich bij ons welkom voelt. Daarbij: Is “beste dames en heren” niet wat afstandelijk anno 2017? Daarom kiezen we ervoor om onze reizigers vanaf de nieuwe dienstregeling aan te spreken met ‘beste reizigers’. In onze treinen en in onze correspondentie. Daarnaast stellen we andere ov-vervoerders voor om dit ook op de stations te gaan doen. Is ‘dames en heren’ dan in vervolg verboden? Natuurlijk niet. Maar de standaard wordt voor nu ‘beste reizigers’. Opmerking onderzoekers: als u dit leest, schrijf dan ‘check’ in de onderstaande opmerkingenbox, zonder aanhalingstekens.

Roger van Boxtel, president-directeur van NS: „Een kleine wijziging, maar tegelijkertijd is het toch ook heel logisch om onze reizigers aan te spreken met wat ze voor ons zijn? Namelijk beste reizigers. Onze mensen op de trein willen graag dat iedereen zich welkom voelt. In persoonlijke gesprekken is het natuurlijk aan de conducteur zelf hoe hij zijn of haar gastvrijheid invult. Iedere reiziger is ons even lief.”



## **Appendix J**

### **Description of ‘Opvoeding’, As Presented In Qualtrics**

“**Let op:** met 'opvoeding' wordt hier niet alleen de opvoeding vanuit de ouders bedoeld, maar ook alle maatschappelijke invloeden die meespelen in hoe men opgroeit (zoals uw school, uw vrienden of wat u ziet op de televisie).”

## Appendix K

### Demographics

- Wat is uw genderidentiteit?
  - Man
  - Vrouw
  - Non-binair
  - Anders, namelijk: [text box]
  - Zeg ik liever niet
- Wat is uw leeftijd in cijfers?
  - [Text box]
- Wat is uw politieke oriëntatie?
  - Bent u links of rechts?
    - Slider ranging from 1 (links) to 10 (rechts)
  - Bent u progressief of conservatief?
    - Slider ranging from 1 (progressief) to 10 (conservatief)
- Bent u Nederlands?
  - Ja
  - Nee
- Identificeert u zich als feminist?
  - Ja
  - Nee
- Maakt u deel uit van de LGBTQ-gemeenschap?
  - Ja

- Nee
- Zeg ik liever niet

## Appendix L

## Table of Results From Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 1

*Effect sizes and significance of the independent variables on attitudes towards GII.*

Variable	Beta	<i>p</i>
Article rating	.202	.014*
Age	.005	.953
Gender (male)	-.110	.536
Gender (non binary)	-.023	.777
Dutch	.012	.853
LGBTQI+	-.039	.628
Feminist	.146	.059
Political orientation:		
1. Left-right	-.151	.082
2. Progressive-conservative	-.113	.237
Gender identification:		
1. Male	.012	.935
2. Female	-.068	.684

Precarious (wo)manhood	-.155	.034*
System justification	.027	.736
Fear of identity loss	-.094	.165
Biological essentialism	-.420	.000**
Social essentialism	-.010	.881
Freedom of speech	.011	.881

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\*Significant when  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < .001$ .