

Metaphor and Trans Lived Experiences: An Investigation into the Metaphors Used to Talk About Gender Dysphoria on Reddit

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Abstract

In a socio-political climate marked by rising hostility towards transgender people, including increasing restrictions on trans women's access to women-only spaces and growing movements to remove education on gender identity from school curricula, developing an accurate contemporary understanding of gender dysphoria from the perspective of those with lived experience is both urgent and necessary. This thesis investigates how transgender people use metaphor to talk about their experiences of gender dysphoria and considers how these metaphors are evaluated by other members of the trans community.

The dataset comprises twenty Reddit threads totalling approximately 38,000 words from the ten most popular transgender subreddits. The study focuses on 'naturally elicited' metaphors occurring in discussions in which users explicitly ask for metaphors for gender dysphoria or propose their own metaphors and invite evaluation from others. These metalinguistic discussions demonstrate a high degree of awareness regarding the important role metaphor plays in the communication of difficult personal experiences.

This thesis presents the source domains used to describe gender dysphoria, considers their framing effects, and explores the forms of evaluation they receive. The source domains identified are often creative, embodied, and construct gender dysphoria in terms of a binary contrast between a right versus a wrong option. They capture both bodily and social dysphoria, expanding current clinical definitions. The existing frameworks for metaphor evaluation are developed, and new categories of metaphor endorsement and resistance are identified.

This thesis contributes to research on metaphorical embodiment, metaphor evaluation, and metaphorical creativity in naturally occurring online discourse in addition to understandings of trans lived experiences more generally. The findings of this research have significant implications for clinical communication, education, and public awareness. This research aims to facilitate more empathetic, informed and accurate understandings of gender diversity.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of higher degree elsewhere.

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT-4.0 for proofreading and copy-editing to improve clarity, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style. I confirm that the editorial contribution made by ChatGPT did not exceed this remit.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis investigates the metaphors that transgender Reddit users produce in response to metalinguistic prompts which ask them to use figurative language to describe their experiences of gender dysphoria. It also examines how members of these online trans communities evaluate these metaphors, providing insight into how this experience is conceptualised.

Gender dysphoria – commonly defined as distress or discomfort resulting from an incongruence between one’s assigned gender and gender identity (Cooper et al., 2020) – remains a widely misunderstood experience. This may in part be because it “is a rare experience in society as a whole, affecting about 0.4 per cent of the population” (Faye, 2021, p. 66). In addition, in the UK there is little formal education on gender diversity in schools, with seventy-seven per cent of LGBTQ+ pupils stating that they have not received any teaching about gender identity or what being ‘trans’ means (Faye, 2021). Recent political discourse suggests that this situation is unlikely to improve. During the 2024 general election, the Conservative Party pledged to ensure that “the contested concept of gender identity is not taught to children” (Conservative and Unionist Party, 2024, p. 27), while Reform UK (2024) vowed to “ban transgender ideology in primary and secondary schools” including prohibiting “gender questioning, social transitioning or pronoun swapping” (p. 11).

In the past decade referrals to gender identity health services have shown a “dramatic increase” (Cass, 2024, p. 120), with referrals to child and adolescent services increasing from 210 per year between 2011 and 2012 to over 5000 per year between 2021 and 2022 (Health & Bunn, 2023). There is less publicly available data on trans adults’ access to health services, but research suggests that more adults are seeking support than in previous years (Health & Bunn, 2023). Yet, within healthcare contexts, understandings of gender dysphoria are limited. A recent survey of 646 UK medical practitioners found that less than a third of respondents (31%) felt they had received adequate medical training to support their trans patients. In cases where practitioners reported having received sufficient training, they often stated that they had to proactively seek it out, and in some cases, pay for it themselves (TransActual, 2025). An inquiry by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, their most recent inquiry into transgender equality,

states: “trans people encounter significant problems in using general NHS services due to the attitude of some clinicians and other staff when providing care for trans patients. This is attributable to lack of knowledge and understanding – and even in some cases to out-and-out prejudice” (p. 43).

A nuanced understanding of gender dysphoria from the perspective of those with lived experience is therefore urgent and critical. This thesis investigates how trans people use metaphor to talk about gender dysphoria in order to gain further insight into how this experience is communicated and conceptualised. It focuses specifically on ‘naturally elicited’ metaphors occurring in Reddit threads where trans users discuss ‘good’ metaphors for describing gender dysphoria. Reddit is structured around user-created, interest-based communities where members frequently share personal experiences and seek peer-support, making it a suitable source for accessing naturally occurring first-hand accounts of gender dysphoria. The term ‘naturally elicited’ is used here to refer to metaphors that are prompted by other community members rather than a researcher. In this dataset, users asked other contributors for metaphors for gender dysphoria or proposed their own metaphor and asked others to evaluate it, demonstrating a high-level of metalinguistic awareness of metaphor’s communicative function. Thus, the metaphors examined here were not produced in response to researcher-led questioning, stimulus materials, or elicitation tasks, but emerged through peer interaction within the community.

Metaphor “involves talking and, potentially, thinking about one thing in terms of another, where the two things are different, but some form of similarity can be perceived between them” (Semino et al., 2018, p. 5). It allows people to talk about abstract, subjective and complex experiences in more concrete and accessible terms. Gender dysphoria is one such experience: it is deeply personal and as a result trans people “often rely on metaphors” to make their experiences intelligible to others and to themselves (Faye, 2021, p. 66). Beyond facilitating communication about difficult or sensitive topics, metaphors also express attitudes, evaluations and stances by framing experiences in particular ways (Semino et al., 2018). In doing so, they provide a particular stance on the topic at hand by foregrounding certain aspects of an experience and backgrounding others (Semino et al., 2018).

This framing function is central to the present study. Metaphors do not simply describe gender dysphoria, but they contribute to how it is discussed, understood and evaluated. For this reason, this thesis not only identifies the metaphors used to talk about gender dysphoria within trans Reddit communities, but also examines how these metaphors are endorsed, resisted and negotiated by community members. By analysing both metaphor use and community evaluation, this thesis offers insight into how trans people collaboratively construct and make sense of gender dysphoria.

This introductory chapter begins by presenting the current political climate surrounding trans identities. Then, some key terms used throughout the thesis will be defined. Following this, a brief historical overview of how trans identities have come to be understood in the Global North will be provided. Next, the rationale for this study and the research questions it addresses will be introduced. Finally, this chapter concludes by outlining the structure of the thesis and summarising the content of the subsequent chapters.

1.1. Contextualising Trans Rights: The Current Climate

Transgender identities and ‘issues’ have received increased attention and visibility over the past decade. *Vogue* declared 2015 the year of trans visibility (Taylor, 2015). The American actress and trans advocate Laverne Cox was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine’s June 2014 issue - a significant moment for trans representation in mainstream media. Cox was later declared one of *People’s* most beautiful women in 2015 and featured on the cover of *British Vogue* in 2019. ‘Transgender’ and ‘Transgender Issues’ are now headings on mainstream news websites, including *BBC News*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Daily Mail*. In 2024 alone, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* produced 591 articles containing the search term “transgender” - approximately 1.6 articles per day. Frequent debates about trans people and their rights have ensued in parliament, on daytime TV, on social media, and in private.

One might assume that such consistent coverage would be a positive step for trans awareness and inclusion, yet this is not the case. Shon Faye (2021) a prominent trans writer, journalist, and presenter notes that when trans people are given a platform to speak, it is often to defend their existence and basic rights. Faye (2021) states that when the media want to discuss trans issues “it means they want to talk about their issues with us, not the challenges facing us” (p. 13). The

media often sensationalise what makes trans people ‘different’ or ‘peculiar’, rather than highlighting experiences and issues that might be familiar to wider society (Faye, 2021, p. 127). In addition, it is often ‘acceptable’ trans people who fit Western cis-heteropatriarchal ideals who are given such opportunities – namely, able bodied, white middle- to upper-class trans people. Typically, a select number of issues are discussed, such as trans people’s (often trans women’s) use of public spaces, which diverts attention from more pressing issues (Faye, 2021).

Trans people are nothing new; what is new is the moral panic surrounding trans identities (Erlick, 2025). Duffy (2025) argues that in the UK these moral panics are fuelled by a politico-religious agenda that actively demonizes queer and trans people, presenting them as manifestations of deviance that must be suppressed or problems to be solved. As a result, they become political pawns deployed for the purposes of electoral gain, reflecting wider societal anxieties around gender diversity. These narratives are amplified by mainstream media outlets and the widespread use of social media, which plays a significant role in disseminating disinformation (Duffy, 2025). They have caused profound damage to the trans community, contributing to healthcare bans, increased hostility, and violent attacks (Erlick, 2025).

Trans people continue to face stigmatisation in most, if not all, aspects of their daily lives. As a result, many trans young people are afraid to tell those at home they are trans. Rejection is a reality for many LGBTQ+ people, and research from UK LGBT youth homelessness charity Akt (2025) found that LGBTQ+ people are twice as likely to experience hidden homelessness (such as sofa surfing or squatting) compared to non-LGBTQ+ individuals. The same report also revealed that one third of trans young people surveyed had experienced homelessness (Akt, 2025).

In addition to facing potentially hostile home environments, trans young people frequently have their identities invalidated at school, with one third of trans pupils reporting that they are not addressed by their preferred name (Faye, 2021). Attempts to create inclusive learning environments have been resisted by the media who generate moral panics around a supposed ‘gender ideology’ or ‘craze’ infiltrating the education system and the lives of young people (Faye, 2021; Duffy, 2025). The media also attack organizations who provide support, training, and advocacy for trans people, while implying that it is ‘cool’ or ‘trendy’ to be trans and that

children transition to gain attention or special treatment (Faye, 2021). This is clearly not the case, as the figures demonstrate. Furthermore, the media often exaggerate the number of people who detransition, using these cases to suggest that young children are misguided or susceptible to external influences.

This lack of education on gender diversity manifests in terms of bullying and harassment. Trans school children frequently report being bullied because of their gender identity or perceived sexual orientation (64%), with thirteen per cent stating that this included physical violence (Stonewall, 2017). Evidence suggests that the situation is only worsening. In February 2023 Briana Ghey, a 16-year-old girl was murdered by two teenagers in a transphobic attack. One year later, another British trans girl¹ was subjected to a similarly violent attack, as she was stabbed by another teenage girl. These incidents highlight the hostility faced by trans young people and demonstrate the urgent need for inclusive education.

The situation is equally concerning for trans adults. Trans adults are less likely to be employed than their cisgender counterparts, with a 2018 report revealing that a third of UK employers state they would be “less likely” to hire a transgender person (Crossland Employment Solicitors, 2018). Even when trans people are in employment, they are at risk of workplace discrimination. Although legislation such as the Equality Act (2010) is intended to protect against such treatment, “one in eight British trans people have been physically attacked at work” (Stonewall in Faye, 2021). These disadvantages are further compounded for trans people who belong to other minority groups, such as disabled, working-class, or BAME trans people.

Although the Equality Act (2010) was designed to prevent discrimination, it has since become a site of political contention. During the 2024 general election, the Conservative Party pledged to amend the Act by redefining the legal meaning of sex and gender – a change that would prevent trans women from accessing single-sex spaces (YouGov, 2025). This not only threatens the legal protections currently afforded to trans people but also legitimises social exclusion and reinforces narratives that trans people are a threat to women's safety. As of December 2025, the effects of these developments are already evident, with the exclusion of trans girls and young women from Girlguiding following the organisation’s revision of its membership policy in response to the

¹ The victim of this attack has not been named (Crown Prosecution Service, 2025).

Supreme Court ruling on sex and gender (Girlguiding, 2025). This rhetoric contributes to a broader culture of hostility in which trans people face barriers to acceptance, education, employment, healthcare, and everyday safety. Consequently, trans people are subject to social stigma which has been shown to contribute to significant mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression and suicidality (e.g., Bockting et al., 2013; Puckett et al., 2020; Rood et al., 2015; Puckett et al., 2023).

1.2. Definitions

Faye (2021) notes when writing about trans people it is still customary to define the term ‘trans(gender)’, which in itself is telling. The term ‘transgender’ can be used to capture a diverse range of very different identities and experiences (Faye, 2021). In this thesis, I will adopt Faye’s (2021) definition of ‘trans’ as follows:

‘Trans’ (...) is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity (their personal sense of their own gender) varies from, does not sit comfortably with, or is different from, the biological sex recorded on their birth certificate based on the appearance of the external genitalia. (p. xvi)

The terms ‘trans’ and ‘transgender’ will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. It should also be noted that the people referred to as trans in this thesis self-identify as such.

Faye (2021) notes that “[to] be trans is, on some level, to feel that this standardized relationship between one’s genitalia at birth and the assignment of one of two fixed gender identities that are supposed to accurately reflect your feelings about your own body has been interrupted” (p. xvi). This interruption or discomfort is clinically labelled ‘gender dysphoria’, and how it is experienced varies hugely from person to person (Faye, 2021). Stryker (2017) offers a more socially oriented definition of gender dysphoria, describing it as a feeling of unhappiness regarding the incongruence between how one understands one’s gender and how it is perceived or recognised by others.

Many trans people transition to alleviate these feelings, while others may feel that this is not necessary. Transitioning refers to a movement away from the gender an individual was assigned

at birth towards an alternative preferred state of gendered or non-gendered being (Pearce, 2018). Transitioning can take various forms; an individual may transition socially whereby they change their name, their pronouns, or their style of dress, or they may transition medically through hormone replacement therapy and/or surgery.

It should be noted that dysphoria is not a precondition of being trans and not all trans people experience dysphoria (Faye, 2021). However, most trans people do experience dysphoria to some degree – this figure is estimated to be around ninety per cent (Faye, 2021).

Many definitions of dysphoria assume a binary model of sex and gender, which remains the dominant understanding in Western societies. The idea persists that there are only two genders, man and woman, based on two assigned sexes, male and female (Stryker, 2017; Pearce, 2018). This understanding has been problematised for various reasons, including not being medically accurate - it fails to account for intersex people, for example. Nevertheless, this binary understanding is dominant, and it is reflected in trans (often, medicalist) discourse, in terms such as “male-to-female” and “female-to-male”. However, not all trans people find moving between the pre-existing poles of man and woman satisfactory or accurate (Faye, 2021). Those who identify outside this binary (commonly referred to as nonbinary) are often less well understood than trans men and trans women as they challenge both the idea that one’s sex assigned at birth and gender are inseparable, and the idea that there are only two genders (Faye, 2021).

While the above authors provide more theoretical definitions of gender dysphoria, Cooper et al., (2020) offer an account of how it is lived and experienced. In a systematic review of the available qualitative studies on the lived experience of gender dysphoria in transgender adults (n=20), they identified four main themes. The first theme was distress due to the dissonance of assigned and experienced gender, often manifesting as body dysphoria. This included feelings of unease, disgust or hatred towards the body, particularly towards the genitals and secondary sex characteristics. Some participants reported a profound sense of disembodiment or detachment from their physical body. The second theme concerned the interface of assigned gender, gender identity, and society, where participants described misalignment between their gender identity and social expectations which caused them to deny or suppress their gender identity. Participants acknowledged their trans identity caused feelings of shame due to negative views of transgender

identities in society; thus, they believed that suppressing their identity was necessary to be accepted by others. The third theme concerned the negative social consequences of gender identity, including misgendering, rejection from family and friends, bullying, and stigma, which frequently intensified experiences of dysphoria. The final theme, the internal processing of rejection and transphobia, described how these experiences were internalized leading to shame, hypervigilance, and anxiety. Together, these themes demonstrate that gender dysphoria not only results from the mismatch between the body and gender identity, but also from the reactions of others.

Cooper et al.'s (2020) research therefore exposes two distinct yet intertwined understandings of gender-related distress among individuals who experience gender dysphoria. The first is a diagnostic conceptualisation, as outlined in diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which defines distress in terms of an incongruence between assigned and experienced gender. The second is a more social or stigma-focused conceptualisation, which relates distress resulting from the discrimination and marginalisation that trans people encounter.

The terms cis and cisgender (the antonyms of 'trans' and 'transgender') are used in this thesis to refer to anyone who is not trans and whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth (Mock, 2014; Faye, 2021). The prefix 'cis'- derives from Latin, meaning 'on the same side' whereas 'trans-' means 'across from' (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, p. 152). While the term 'cis' allows for more nuanced discussions around gender (Serano, 2007), it has been the subject of contention as some people feel it redefines a majority experience that was previously seen as the default or norm (Faye, 2021). However, the purpose of the term is to resist the way in which "woman" or "man" is often synonymous with "non-transgender woman" or "non-transgender man" (Stryker, 2017). It has also been noted that strict use of the prefixes could enforce another kind of binary: cis- versus trans- (Ansara and Hegarty, 2012; Enke, 2012; Stryker, 2017). Thereby, stripping 'trans' of movement (Pearce, 2018, p. 43). This is not the intention here.

My choice of terminology has been informed by contemporary works written by trans authors. However, language evolves rapidly therefore it is acknowledged that some linguistic choices used in this thesis may appear outdated to future readers.

1.3. A Brief History of Trans Identities

In order to make sense of how trans identities are understood and received today, it is necessary to provide a brief history of gender diversity. This overview does not claim to be exhaustive, it merely scratches the surface of a rich and complex history of gender diversity within the Global North, focusing predominately on the United Kingdom. It firstly explores understandings of sex and gender which move beyond the binary, before considering the trajectory of medical science and how it has ‘classified’ and ‘treated’ trans people, focusing particularly on the field of sexology. It concludes by reflecting on how such classifications continue to shape perceptions of trans people in present day.

As previously established, Western societies primarily operate with a binary understanding of sex and gender. This seems entrenched, deep-rooted and is presented as the norm. It infiltrates most, if not all, aspects of our daily lives from completing medical forms to deciding whether to shop in the ‘women’s’ or ‘men’s’ section. Stryker (2017) notes that in the contemporary United States, gender categorisation is based on sex (this also applies to the United Kingdom). However, historically and cross-culturally various systems of organising people into genders have existed (Stryker, 2017).

Some cultures recognise three or more genders. For example, Native Hawaiians recognized Māhū as people who occupy a space between the poles of male and female (Mock, 2014). Māhū were typically assigned male at birth but adopted feminine gender roles and were respected as spiritual healers, cultural bearers, and teachers (Mock, 2014). Similarly, many Indigenous North American communities have a ‘two-spirit’ understanding of gender – this refers to a wide array of gender-variant social and ceremonial roles (Faye, 2021). Other cultures have attributed gender according to social roles or labour, while others have allowed people to change gender based on visions or dreams (Stryker, 2017).

Thus, a binary understanding of gender is far from universal. Historical accounts of gender-variant people have been identified in almost every recorded human culture. In some cultures, such gender diversity was (and is) celebrated and accepted, while in others it has been pathologized and viewed as a moral failure worthy of punishment (Faye, 2021). The latter view is largely the result of colonialism which imposed Western, typically Christian, understandings

of sex and gender, erasing other nonbinary and fluid conceptualisations. Western cultures in the Global North were thought of as advanced and enlightened, dismissing other gender systems as primitive or regressive.

Western ideals of masculinity and femininity were intimately bound up with Christian notions of the body (Shilling, 2003). However, by the end of the eighteenth century, the Church's control over bodily regulation declined, and the medical establishment came to occupy its space (Turner, 1992; Stryker, 2017). Much like religion, medicine continued to serve a moral function; however, though this was "typically disguised and (...) ultimately legitimized by an appeal to scientific rather than religious authority" (Turner, 1992, p. 23). Medical professionals acquired the social power to determine what was considered unhealthy or healthy, normal or pathological (Stryker, 2017). Stryker (2017) notes that "since the middle of the nineteenth century medical science has played an increasingly central role in defining everyday life" (p. 51) and this has been particularly prevalent for trans and gender diverse (TGD) people.

In the late nineteenth century, the medical field of sexology emerged. This was primarily concerned with classifying and treating sexual or gender 'deviant' behaviours (Faye, 2021). Psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing is generally considered one of the first people to study the sexual impulses of individuals (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). In *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Krafft-Ebing attempts to categorize what he considered to be various types of psychosexual disorders, including homosexuality (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Krafft-Ebing distinguished between acquired and congenital homosexuality, believing both to contain transgender elements (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). He coined the term "metamorphosis sexualis paranoica" to refer to what he believed to be the most extreme form of gender deviation, namely, those who identified as members of the "opposite" sex, and desired to physically change the sex-signifying aspects of their bodies (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Krafft-Ebing considered such people to be disturbed and found their desire to transition psychotic (Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

This rudimentary understanding was developed by the work of pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld was a passionate advocate for gay and trans rights; he established the world's first gay rights organisation in 1897 and later founded the world's first institute for Sexology in 1919 (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). In *The Transvestites* (1910), the first book-length

study of trans identities, Hirschfeld distinguished between gender identity and sexuality – both of which had previously been conflated. Hirschfeld also argued for a spectrum between an “absolute” man and an “absolute” woman, noting that absolute representatives of their sex are invented extremes (Hirschfeld in Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 35). Hirschfeld considered trans people, as well as homosexual and intersex people, to be “sexual intermediaries” on this spectrum (Hirschfeld in Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 36). Hirschfeld believed variation in human sexuality and gender to be part of nature and thought that a just society should recognise this biological reality (Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Stryker, 2017).

The term “transvestite” was coined by Hirschfeld to describe the feelings and thoughts of someone who desires to wear “clothing of the opposite sex” (Hirschfeld in Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 38). However, Hirschfeld originally applied this term to what would later be known as transsexualism or transsexuality, rather than its modern sense of cross-dressing (Stryker, 2017). Thus, Hirschfeld’s work anticipated the later distinction between sexuality and gender expression (Pearce, 2018).

Hirschfeld also made use of the term “transsexualismus”, which was popularised in its anglicised form “transsexual” during the 1950s by his colleague Harry Benjamin. Benjamin used the term to distinguish between “transvestites” (in Hirschfeld’s original use of the term) who sought hormonal and surgical interventions and those who wished to cross-dress (Stryker, 2017). This term was also used by David O. Cauldwell in his 1949 article *Psychopathia Transexualis*, which although influential, pathologized transgender identities. Cauldwell argued that trans people are mentally unwell and attributed being trans to a “poor hereditary background and a highly unfavourable childhood environment” (Cauldwell in Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 40-41).

By the late 1950s, the identity labels used today had largely fallen into place (Stryker, 2017). This does not mean, however, that trans identities were accepted. In fact, the same hormones used today in gender-affirming care were administered by endocrinologists attempting to ‘cure’ sexual and gender variance (Faye, 2021). For example, homosexual ‘females’ were ‘treated’ with oestrogen and homosexual ‘males’ were given testosterone, or in some cases oestrogen, to chemically castrate them (Faye, 2021). These inhumane practices ceased in the 1950s but were succeeded by psychiatric ‘treatments’ such as electroshock and aversion therapy (Faye, 2021).

It was not until the 1960s that transsexualism became a formally recognized diagnosis within the British medical establishment (Faye, 2021). It was also around this time that gender variance began to feature in major diagnostic manuals. ‘Transvestitism’ was featured in The World Health Organization’s *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Health Related Problems* in 1965 (ICD-8) and in the *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1968 (DSM-II). When medical transitioning through hormone therapy and surgery were introduced, they were used as a means to determine who was ‘trans enough’ to receive care, reinforcing the gender binary (Faye, 2021). Medical institutions came to be considered ‘gatekeepers’ among trans people as treatment was only given to those who medical authorities believed would ‘pass’ as cisgender. Consequently, many trans people felt compelled to narrate their experiences in ways that aligned with medical expectations in order to access treatment.

In the UK, it has been argued that an element of gatekeeping persists (Pearce, 2018). With the exception of Wales, the UK operates with a gender identity clinic model whereby patients must obtain a GP referral to access gender identity services (Faye, 2021). Whilst gender identity specialists “rarely relish the exercise of power” (Richards et al., 2014, p. 255), the continued emphasis on assessment and diagnosis works to ensure they play a gatekeeping role through which they act as “gender experts” (Pearce, 2018, p. 60). For example, trans patients are typically required to obtain a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria from at least two gender identity specialists and to complete the ‘Real Life Experience’ (RLE) whereby a patient has to live in their ‘preferred’ gender role for a one-year period before qualifying for surgery (previously, this was also a requirement for access to hormone therapy) (Pearce, 2018; Faye, 2021).

Assessments are typically carried out on two separate occasions and involve interviews in which patients are questioned about their history of gendered feelings, their past and present relationship with their body, and their sexual fantasies or experiences (Barrett, 2007; Speer, 2013; NHS England, 2015). As a result, many trans people feel as though they have to tell a particular narrative which reaffirms the gender binary in order to access the treatment they need (Billings & Urban 1982 as cited in Spade, 2006). Stone (1991) questions “who is telling the story for whom, and how do the storytellers differentiate between the story they tell and the story they hear?” (p. 161). In a similar vein, Bettcher (2009) argues that such practises deny first-person

authority to the transgender identity experience. It has been suggested that patients who “deviate from normative models of gendered possibility”, for example, identifying as genderqueer or nonbinary, are more likely to report negative experiences of medical gatekeeping (Pearce, 2018, p. 113). This is not typically rooted in prejudice on the part of medical professionals, but it seems to stem from different understandings of what it means to be trans (Pearce, 2018).

The sex/gender binary is also reinforced in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria, which employ language such as “a strong desire to be the other gender” and “a strong desire to have the sex characteristics of the other gender”. Such phrasing again positions trans identity as a desire to transition to the ‘other’ gender in a binary system. Despite updates in the DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) aimed at reducing stigma, the diagnostic criteria continue to rely overwhelmingly on binary linguistic choices offering limited recognition of nonbinary and gender-diverse identities.

This demonstrates the issue of medicalisation - viewing trans identities primarily through a medical lens has long been problematic, as it perpetuates the harmful idea that being trans is unhealthy or pathological. Historically, this perspective has led to trans people being subjected to dehumanizing psychiatric treatments and contributed to the harmful belief that being trans is a mental illness. Furthermore, defining gender dysphoria as a medical condition can undermine trans people’s bodily autonomy by implying that their gender identity is legitimate only when validated by medical professionals. This dependence on medical validation can create barriers to accessing gender-affirming care. In response, trans depathologisation movements have emerged to challenge dominant medical understandings of transgender as a psychiatric condition – understandings reflected in diagnostic manuals such as the DSM (Vähäpassi, 2013, p. 34; Pearce, 2018). These movements do not seek to remove access to medical interventions for transitioning individuals but advocate for a different understanding of trans health (Pearce, 2018).

1.4. Research Gap and Research Questions

Metaphor is a pervasive, and often unconscious, feature of everyday language and thought. It is a “crucial tool for communication and reasoning” (Semino et al., 2018, p. 7) which greatly expands our conceptual and communicative abilities as it allows us to draw from the knowledge and language of one conceptual domain to better understand and communicate about another

conceptual domain (Semino, 2021). Metaphor enables us to talk about the abstract and unfamiliar in terms of the concrete and familiar.

A substantial body of research shows that people produce more metaphor, particularly creative metaphor to talk about intense or emotionally complex experiences (e.g., Fainsilber and Ortony, 1987; Littlemore, Turner & Tuck, 2023). It has been suggested that this is because metaphor provides a compact, vivid, and potentially more expressive way of communicating aspects of an experience than literal language alone (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Gibbs, 1994). Investigating the metaphor use of an individual or community can help better understand how people think about an experience and make sense of the world around them (Cameron, 2003). As metaphors carry evaluations, they can reveal people's emotions, attitudes, and belief systems (Cameron & Maslen, 2010, p. vii), which makes them a valuable research tool for exploring lived experience.

Despite this, little is currently known about how transgender people use metaphor to describe gender dysphoria. Existing research on metaphor and lived experiences has tended to focus on medical contexts such as cancer, pregnancy loss, and schizophrenia. Given the increasing political, educational and clinical significance of how gender dysphoria is understood, this lack of research represents an important gap in the literature.

As previously mentioned, referrals to gender identity services are continually rising and those seeking gender-affirming care are assessed to determine whether they meet the diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria (Cooper et al., 2020). Developing a contemporary understanding of gender dysphoria is therefore crucial as it directly affects who is granted access to medical support and shapes the sensitivity with which such support is delivered.

In addition, UK curricula offer limited and often outdated information on gender identity. Improving these materials could help to facilitate more empathetic, informed and accurate understandings of gender diversity among young people. This could potentially help counter hostility and transphobia that often arise from misinformation and lack of familiarity. In this sense, education plays a critical preventative role, equipping students with the critical thinking skills necessary to recognise and challenge prejudice.

This thesis seeks to provide a current understanding of gender dysphoria as described by those with lived experience. It investigates how trans people use metaphor to talk about their personal experiences of gender dysphoria in trans subreddits on the social media platform Reddit.

To address this overarching aim, the thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. Which metaphorical source domains do transgender people use to talk about their lived experiences of gender dysphoria in response to metalinguistic prompts on Reddit and how do they frame the experience?
2. How are these metaphors evaluated by other users?
 - a. In what ways are metaphors endorsed through user comments?
 - b. In what ways are metaphors resisted through user comments?
3. Which source domains receive the highest levels of evaluative engagement?

By examining metaphor production and evaluation of ‘naturally elicited metaphors’, this study contributes to current knowledge on metaphorical embodiment, metaphorical creativity, metaphor evaluation, and gender dysphoria.

1.5. Thesis Outline

This thesis is comprised of nine chapters. Chapter 2 provides a literature review which begins by outlining arguably the most influential paradigm in metaphor research, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth, CMT). It then considers the limitations of CMT and introduces alternative approaches that seek to address these, including Systematic Metaphor Theory and Dynamic Embodiment. The chapter then discusses metaphorical framing and reviews empirical evidence for framing effects. Next, it presents the different approaches for accounting for metaphorical creativity, moving from more conceptual approaches, including CMT and Conceptual Integration Theory, to more discourse-based approaches. Following this, the existing typologies for metaphor evaluation are outlined, considering both metaphor endorsement and resistance. Finally, the limited body of research on metaphor and trans lived experiences is reviewed.

Chapter 3 outlines the data and methodology. It describes the data source and presents the ethical considerations undertaken when collecting and analysing sensitive data. Following this, it

presents the procedures for collecting, identifying, and coding the metaphors for gender dysphoria. Finally, it describes the method used to identify and categorise the different forms of metaphor evaluation in the data, including positive evaluation via endorsement (both implicit and explicit forms) and negative evaluation via resistance.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the metaphorical source domains used to describe gender dysphoria and reflects on how they frame the experience. Then, the three most frequently occurring source domains CLOTHING (Chapter 5), FOOD/DRINK (Chapter 6), and HEALTH/ILLNESS (Chapter 7) are discussed in depth in their respective chapters.

Chapter 8 explores how the metaphors are evaluated by other users; it develops and expands existing typologies for metaphor evaluation based on examples found in the dataset. It then presents which source domains received the highest levels of evaluative engagement.

Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the thesis, by providing a summary of the key findings, reflecting on the limitations of this research, and identifying potential directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section begins by summarising Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and addressing its limitations. Next, alternative approaches aimed to overcome the limitations of CMT are introduced including Systematic Metaphor Theory and Dynamic Embodiment. Following this, the concept of metaphorical framing is considered and empirical evidence in support of metaphorical framing effects is reviewed. The chapter then presents the different approaches accounting for metaphorical creativity, moving from conceptual approaches including Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Integration Theory to more discourse-based approaches such as Dynamic Systems Theory. Finally, the existing typologies for metaphor evaluation are presented, before the limited research on metaphor and trans lived experiences is discussed.

2.1. Metaphor and Cognition

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) renowned publication *Metaphors We Live By* is often said to have kickstarted the most influential theory within metaphor research, which is now known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT). However, although Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal work brought widespread attention to the role of metaphor in cognition, along with other key publications such as Ortony's *Metaphor and Thought* (1979), it is important to acknowledge that many of the central insights of CMT were previously developed by scholars such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1873) and Max Black (1962). The recognition of the cognitive role of metaphor is not recent. The works of Aristotle, Kant, Weinrich and Blumenberg all consider the role of metaphor in thought (cf. Mahon, 1999; Jäkel, 1999). Thus, Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work builds upon centuries of scholarship.

2.1.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors are not merely a matter of language, but a matter of thought, thus suggesting that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured. To support these claims, they cite numerous examples of systematic groupings of metaphorical linguistic expressions which they argue are manifestations of, and evidence for, underlying conceptual metaphors within thought. For example, Lakoff and Johnson

(1980) propose that everyday linguistic expressions such as “he *attacked every weak point* in my argument”, “he *shot down* all of my arguments”, and “I’ve never *won* an argument with him” are all realisations of the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR (p. 4). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that such metaphors influence our actions, thus, it is not simply a case of talking about arguments in terms of war, but a case of conceptualising arguments in terms of war; one can win or lose arguments, and one can attack others’ positions whilst defending one’s own.

Conceptual metaphors consist of systematic sets of correspondences or ‘mappings’ between two conceptual domains, namely, a ‘target’ domain which typically corresponds to a more abstract or complex area of experience, and a ‘source’ domain which corresponds to a more familiar and clearly delineated area of experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003). Thus, in the preceding example, the ARGUMENT target domain is partially structured (and understood) in terms of the source domain of WAR². Lakoff and Johnson argue that these mappings are seldom neutral and can therefore result in particular entailments. In other words, the choice of a particular source domain has the ability to highlight certain aspects of the target domain whilst hiding others.

Thus, in the ARGUMENT IS WAR conceptual metaphor, the cooperative aspects of arguments, such as giving up one’s time in an effort at mutual understanding, are backgrounded, whilst the aggressive aspects of arguments are brought to the forefront (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Thus, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that if an alternative conceptual metaphor was chosen, such as ARGUMENT IS DANCE this would result in different entailments whereby the cooperative aspects of arguments may become more apparent. More recently, scholars have referred to this phenomenon as the “framing effect” of metaphor (e.g., Semino et al., 2018). The phenomenon of metaphorical framing and empirical evidence that supports it will be discussed in 2.4 *Framing*.

One of the central tenets of CMT is that metaphor allows us to understand and verbalise abstract, complex, and poorly delineated areas of experience in terms of more concrete, familiar and accessible areas of experience, often based on our bodily experiences (Semino, 2008, 2011). For example, the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY (“that’s a *waste* of time”, this gadget will *save* you time”) allows us to talk about and understand the abstract, intangible concept of time as something physical that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, saved, and invested wisely or poorly

² Conceptual metaphors and their corresponding source and target domains are denoted by small capital letters.

(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 7-8). Similarly, the conceptual metaphors HAPPY IS UP (“I’m feeling *up*”, “you’re in *high* spirits”) and SAD IS DOWN (“I’m feeling *down*”, “I fell *into a depression*”, “He’s really *low* these days”) allow us to talk about the abstract concept of emotions in terms of our physical bodily experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 15). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that these metaphors directly reflect our physical interactions as when a person is in a positive emotional state, they typically stand tall, whereas when a person is in a negative emotional state, they typically exhibit a drooping posture. For a further consideration of the physical basis underlying conceptual metaphors, see Section 2.1.2.4 *The Role of the Body*.

This notion of mapping from concrete and familiar to abstract and unfamiliar is also evidenced through the ARGUMENT IS WAR conceptual metaphor, as the source domain of WAR is arguably more tangible than the ARGUMENT target domain. This is not to say that one must have first-hand experience of war, however, one’s exposure to war through books and films provides crucial background knowledge which helps one to better understand and make sense of the metaphor (Semino, 2019).

2.1.2. Limitations of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, particularly the version proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in *Metaphors We Live By*, has faced extensive criticism for: considering language as secondary to thought, its direction of analysis, the level of generality at which conceptual metaphors are proposed, and the role given to the body within the theory. Each of these criticisms will be outlined below, with a particular focus on the role of the body in CMT research.

2.1.2.1. *Considering Language as Secondary to Thought*

Although Lakoff and Johnson (1980) cite metaphorical linguistic expressions as their only source of evidence for conceptual metaphors, they assert that “metaphors are fundamentally conceptual in nature” and maintain that “metaphorical language is secondary” to thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 272). The primacy given to thought is even reflected in the terminology used by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), as they use the term “metaphor” to refer to conceptual mappings, but use the term “metaphorical expression” to refer to the linguistic manifestation of the mapping (Cameron, 2003, p. 19).

As a result of the significance awarded to thought, a notable lack of consideration was given to the authenticity of the linguistic examples cited as evidence for the existence of conceptual metaphors (Semino, 2008, p. 10). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) relied overwhelmingly on artificially constructed or decontextualised linguistic examples, often sourced from memory and/or intuition, as evidence for conceptual metaphors (Semino, 2008, p. 10; Demjén & Semino, 2017, p. 3). This lack of a clear methodology for conceptual metaphor identification casts doubts both on the reliability of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) claims as they are difficult to verify, and also on the exhaustiveness of the theory (Semino, 2008, p. 10). To remedy this issue, more recent studies have made use of authentic contextualised linguistic data, often using corpora as a data source, when researching conceptual metaphors (e.g., Deignan, 2005).

An additional limitation of using decontextualised linguistic examples is that metaphor variation according to the interactants, medium, genre and register was not taken into account (Demjén & Semino, 2017; Semino, 2017). CMT does not consider the complex dynamics of authentic language use and thus cannot adequately account for the specifics of social issues (Cameron et al., 2009).

In addition, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) occasionally proposed conceptual metaphors without offering any metaphorical linguistic expressions as evidence, this is the case with the LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART metaphor they discuss within *Metaphors We Live By*. Again, reinforcing the lack of consideration given to language within the theory. Although in this case Lakoff and Johnson (1980) do offer the caveat that this metaphor is artificially constructed for the purposes of explanation.

2.1.2.2. Direction of Analysis - Top-Down

Moreover, criticism has also been levelled at the direction of analysis employed within CMT research (Kövecses, 2008). As CMT employs a 'top-down' approach to analysis, conceptual metaphors are postulated on the basis of a small number of decontextualised linguistic examples (Kövecses, 2008). However, this approach runs the risk of overgeneralisation (Deignan, 2005). Thus, more recent theories such as Cameron's (2010) Systematic Metaphor Theory attempt to overcome this by analysing metaphor data inductively, situated in its context of use.

2.1.2.3. Level of Generalisation

Early cognitive linguistic approaches have received criticism for the level of conceptual structure at which mappings occur (Semino, Demjén, & Demmen, 2018). It has been suggested that conceptual domains and image schemata cannot always adequately account for metaphor use in context. Thus, some researchers have suggested using alternative mental representations such as ‘scenes’ (Grady 1997), ‘frames’ (Sullivan, 2013) or ‘scenarios’ (Musolff, 2004) to analyse metaphor data as they are richer and more specific.

Musolff (2004, 2006) proposed scenarios as a more detailed unit of analysis in addition to conceptual metaphors. Scenarios are a ‘sub-domain category’ which take the form of “mini-narratives” and include participants, their roles, intentions and states of mind, in addition to their actions in terms of chances of success (Musolff, 2006, p. 24; Deignan, 2017). It has been suggested that scenarios can reflect a speaker’s stance towards a topic (Deignan, 2017). For example, Musolff (2006) illustrates how British and German press reports using metaphors about the single European currency exploit different scenarios from the broad conceptual domain of MARRIAGE, including END-OF-HONEYMOON and ADULTERY scenarios. Although both scenarios draw from the same overarching source domain, they frame the target domain differently ways, resulting in different evaluations.

Musolff (2006) states that scenarios are drawn from discourse data to provide “a platform to link the conceptual side of metaphor to its usage patterns in socially situated discourse” (p. 36).

2.1.2.4. The Role of the Body

The body has always played a central role in CMT, though the way it was conceptualised in early versions of the theory has been problematised. CMT is founded on the notion that one’s body and basic sensorimotor experiences with the physical world are influential upon one’s thoughts, language, and behaviour at different levels of complexity (El Refaie, 2019). At the most basic level of experience are image schemas (Johnson, 1987), namely, skeletal conceptual structures which emerge from the forces and/or spatial configurations which affect the human body (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). An example of the former is the ‘up-down’ image schema which

arises from the effect of gravity on the human body; an image schema that, unsurprisingly, is considered universal (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003) argue that the schematic structures underlying image schemas correlate with other aspects of human experience resulting in pervasive metaphorical mappings (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). Many of these correlations are formed in infancy; for example, the positive experiences of being lifted up and held by a caregiver leads to the formation of the primary metaphors HAPPINESS IS UP and AFFECTION IS WARMTH respectively (Grady, 1997; Gibbs, 1994, p. 414; Lakoff, 2008, p. 26). CMT scholars suggest these early cross-domain correlations persist in our conceptual system leading to the emergence of conceptual metaphors which are evidenced by metaphorical linguistic expressions such as “she’s in high spirits” or “she has a warm personality”. They also claim that such metaphors influence our thoughts and actions throughout life at a mostly automatic and unconscious level (El Refaie, 2014).

The way in which the body and its interactions with the environment influence our thought processes has been termed embodiment (Ziemke et al., 2007). Scholars (e.g., El Refaie, 2014; Littlemore, 2019) have critiqued the universal treatment of embodiment in CMT in which there is an underlying assumption that conceptual metaphors are overwhelmingly cross-cultural, as image schemas are typically based on ‘universal’ embodied experience (such as the effect of gravity on the body). Although there has been some acknowledgement of the social and cultural influences which affect embodiment, in practice CMT scholars have focused on trying to identify how universal metaphorical links are formed in all normally functioning people (El Refaie, 2014). Lakoff and Johnson’s references to “the prototypical person” (1980, p. 132), the “normal conceptual system” (1980, p. 115) and a “normal human being” (1999, p. 57) exemplify this. Littlemore (2019) argues that it is necessary to question who these ‘prototypical’ people are and consider how metaphors are used and experienced by those whose bodily interactions with the world diverge from what might be described as the ‘norm’. Particularly, members of minority groups or less powerful members of society.

In recent years there has been a shift among some metaphor theorists to develop a more nuanced understanding of embodiment by paying increased attention to cross-cultural differences, for example (e.g., Kövecses, 2005; Gibbs, 2006; Johnson, 2007, Musolff, 2017). However, El Refaie

(2014) notes that even these cross-cultural CMT studies operate with static notions of culture and society, and they often conceptualise the body as a static, unchanging object. She argues that “once the body has ‘done its job’” by revealing correspondences between embodied experience and abstract concepts and after “conceptual mappings have become entrenched in our conceptual system”, it is no longer considered to significantly influence the creation of metaphors (p. 20-22). Thus, despite the initial significance placed on the sensorimotor experiences underlying conceptual metaphors, the body and its continual influence on metaphor production is often not fully accounted for.

These limitations motivated a shift towards alternative approaches to metaphor including Systematic Metaphor Theory and Dynamic Embodiment which will be explored in more detail below.

2.2. Systematic Metaphor Theory

An alternative approach towards metaphor analysis is Systematic Metaphor Theory (also known as the ‘Discourse Dynamics’ framework) proposed by Cameron (2010). This approach is “inspired and informed by conceptual metaphor theory” (Cameron, 2010, p. 77) though it differs from CMT in important ways. Firstly, whilst CMT adopts a top-down approach to identifying conceptual metaphors, the Discourse Dynamics approach identifies systematic metaphors by working ‘upwards’ from authentic language data (Cameron, Maslen & Low, 2010). As Knapton and Rundblad (2018) note this approach is particularly useful for real-life datasets as metaphors often do not occur “in tidy sentences or utterances that can be removed from their context for analysis” (p. 390).

Systematic metaphor identification involves identifying the metaphorical linguistic expressions in a dataset, which Cameron (2010) terms metaphor ‘vehicles’. Following this, their corresponding ‘topics’ are determined (Cameron, 2010, p. 79). Metaphor ‘vehicles’ and ‘topics’ can be said to broadly correspond to the ‘source’ and ‘target’ domains of CMT (Cameron, 2003). The metaphor vehicles relating to a particular topic are then grouped together to form systematic metaphors (Cameron, 2010). The grouping of semantically related metaphor vehicles is a recursive and flexible process. Systematic metaphors are denoted by *SMALL ITALIC CAPITALS*, differentiating them from conceptual metaphors which are denoted by *SMALL CAPITALS*

(Cameron, Maslen & Low, 2010). Importantly, systematic metaphors are not simply groupings of semantically related linguistic metaphors, but “a kind of temporary stabilization in the dynamics of thinking-and-talking, which has the possibility of further evolution” as the discourse progresses (Cameron, 2010, p. 91).

Systematic Metaphor Theory therefore differs from CMT in its focus. It is less concerned with establishing universals of human conceptualisation, and more with how individuals talk-and-think within bounded episode of discourse (Cameron, 2003; Cameron, Low & Maslen, 2010, p. 119). As the Discourse Dynamics framework focuses on the metaphors used by participants within a specific social interaction, any claims made about the systematic metaphors identified are considered to be representative of that discourse context only (Cameron, 2010).

Systematic Metaphor Theory maintains a dialogic perspective on metaphor, noting that metaphors are not only cognitive, but also a dynamic and discourse phenomenon influenced by multiple interacting factors (Cameron & Maslen, 2010). Thus, Cameron et al.’s (2010) research forms part of a broader movement within discourse-based approaches to metaphor which adopts a dynamic systems perspective (Semino, Demjén & Demmen, 2018). The dynamic systems approach argues that the meaning and functions of metaphorical expressions cannot be “adequately explained in terms of single factors such as the ‘activation’ of pre-existing conceptual metaphors” (Semino, Demjén & Demmen, 2018, p. 74) but must be understood as emerging from multiple interacting influences (for further consideration of this approach, see 2.5.8 *Dynamic Systems Theory and Metaphorical Creativity*).

2.3. Dynamic Embodiment

El Refaie (2019) notes that two emergent areas of research within contemporary CMT scholarship have begun to reconsider the importance of the lived body not only in the way conceptual metaphors are initially formed, but also in how they are formulated in day-to-day usage. The first area is Kövecses’ (2005) concept of a “differential experiential focus” and the second is the dynamic systems perspective (Gibbs & Cameron, 2008; Cameron, 2010). Drawing these insights together, El Refaie (2014, 2019) proposes a theory of Dynamic Embodiment, which draws from phenomenological and sociological understandings of the lived body into

CMT, to develop a dynamic perspective on embodiment in CMT. This section outlines each area before introducing the concept of Dynamic Embodiment.

2.3.1. Differential Experiential Focus

Kövecses (2005, 2006) proposed the notion of a “differential experiential focus” to account for how different aspects of our bodily functioning may be more salient than others when metaphorically conceptualising a particular target domain, such that some aspects are attuned to whereas others are disregarded or downplayed. Differences in experiential focus arise from the role of context in the creation of primary metaphors (Cuccio, 2017). While many physical and subjective experiences are shared by individuals, which of these experiences we focus on when establishing a primary metaphorical mapping depends on the context in which these experiences are embedded (Cuccio, 2017). Kövecses (2006) discusses and exemplifies this in a cultural sense (i.e., to account for cross-cultural differences) rather than an individual sense. Kövecses (2006) demonstrates how anger is conceptualized differently in English and Chinese and suggests this is because the speakers of each language rely on different aspects of their physiology. In Chinese, metaphors for anger are based on increases in blood pressure (ANGER IS HOT GAS IN A CONTAINER), whereas in English they are based on increases in skin temperature (ANGER IS HEAT) (King, 1989; Yu, 1995, 1998).

Kövecses’ (2015) contextualist theory of metaphor also accounts for the role of the body within metaphor production (for further discussion, see 2.5.3 *Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Context*). Kövecses (2005) argues that situational, linguistic, conceptual-cognitive, and bodily factors influence and constrain the choice of metaphors within a given context. When discussing the bodily dimension, Kövecses’ (2015) argues that the aspects of the body which are activated in the immediate situation may be particularly influential. Kövecses’ illustrates this using Emily Dickinson as an example, suggesting that Dickinson’s optical illness may have affected the metaphors found within her poetry (Kövecses, 2015, p. 120-122).

2.3.2. Dynamic Systems Theory

The second area of research which considers the role of the body in metaphor production in addition to various other social, cognitive and contextual factors is the dynamic systems

perspective (Cameron, 2010; Gibbs & Cameron 2008). Dynamic Systems Theory was not originally formulated to account for metaphoricity, it is based on research in the biological and physical sciences (Gibbs, 2017). However, it is able to integrate multiple theoretical views of metaphor, including cognitive and discourse-based approaches, into one coherent model (Gibbs, 2017; Demjén & Semino, 2017). The premise of the dynamic approach is that when people produce and understand metaphors there are multiple interacting forces at play, ranging from the conceptual metaphors that might be conventional in the relevant language to the physical environment and surrounding co-text. Gibbs (2017) argues that to provide a thorough account of metaphor performance, one should try to account for as many of these factors as possible. The dynamic systems approach has also been used to understand the ways in which metaphor use develops and adapts in communication (e.g. Cameron et al. 2010; Gibbs & Cameron 2008; Demjén & Semino, 2017).

2.3.3. A Dynamic View of Embodiment in Conceptual Metaphor Theory

El Refaie (2014, 2019) aims to pull together these insights in her theory of Dynamic Embodiment which draws from phenomenological and sociological notions of the ‘lived’ body to develop a dynamic perspective on embodiment in CMT. Dynamic embodiment captures how embodied experience is ever-shifting – it constantly changes over time in accordance with our changing personal circumstances and shifts in bodily self-awareness. Dynamic embodiment foregrounds the role of the living, breathing body in the everyday creation of metaphorical mappings. A similar argument has been advanced by Gibbs (2008) who suggests that image-schemas should be “in-the-moment creations” which have “continual relations to bodily experience” (p. 237).

El Refaie’s (2019) approach is influenced by French philosopher Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory of embodiment which proposes that cognition is dependent on having a body through which one can experience the world. El Refaie (2019) also draws on Leder’s (1990, p. 91) dual concept of ‘dis/dys-appearance’. This proposes that our conscious attention is usually directed towards the world, while the body usually ‘disappears’ from the perceptual field it reveals (Leder, 1990, p. 4). However, when our routine ways of engaging with the world are disrupted in some way, for example as a result of pain, illness, aging, puberty or pregnancy our body forces itself into our

conscious awareness as something that is “wrong”, “bad” or “alien” (El Refaie, 2019). Thus, the usual sense of the body as “an invisible, taken-for-granted presence” is unsettled (El Refaie, 2019, p. 182), it is thus experienced as a ‘dys-appearance’ (Leder, 1990). Bullington (2009) refers to this as the disruption of the ‘mind-body-world’ harmony (p. 105).

Dys-appearance can also result from “internalizing the attitudes of people who regard us not as autonomous subjects but as objectified ‘others,’ for instance on the basis of a different skin colour or gender, or because of a visible disability” (El Refaie, 2014, p. 7). It is important to consider the body not as a prediscursive, material reality, but as a vessel of meaning which is constantly being constructed and reconstructed on the basis of social and cultural assumptions about gender, sex, class, race, ethnicity, age, health, and beauty (Waskul & Vannini, 2006; Weiss, 1999). The antonym of dys-appearance, when one experiences the body as “right” or “good”, is ‘eu-appearance’ (Zeiler, 2010). Eu-appearance would apply to experiences such as wanted pregnancy or gender euphoria. It is suggested that the effects of dys-appearance are likely to be more disruptive and longer-lasting than eu-appearance (El Refaie, 2019).

At times when the body captures our attention, particularly when experienced as “wrong”, “problematic” or “alien”, an individual may search for metaphors to help them conceptualise or verbalise this experience (El Refaie, 2019). This changing perception of physicality will influence the way we think about our body which in turn affects the metaphors we use (El Refaie, 2019). El Refaie (2014, 2019) notes that in extreme cases, the relationship with the body may be so unsettled such that the typical directionality of metaphoric mappings from concrete embodied experience to a more abstract concept is reversed and bodily experience becomes not just the source, but also the target of metaphorical mappings.

In this thesis I argue that the notion of dynamic embodiment can be fruitfully applied to the experience of gender dysphoria. I would like to make the caveat that this does not mean in any way that trans identities should be pathologized, nor should trans bodies be considered ‘problematic’ or ‘wrong’. El Refaie (2014) notes that the model of dynamic embodiment “would predict similar patterns of metaphor use in any context where the body cannot simply be taken for granted and where it forces itself into our consciousness” (p. 18), i.e., the body becomes a target domain. The model of dynamic embodiment also allows space for affirming, empowering

and agentive metaphors. Gender euphoria/transitioning may be seen as forms of re-embodiment and becoming. In this way, El Refaie's model can allow for a rich, non-medicalised understanding of gender dysphoria as a part of human experience.

Sociologist accounts align with this view. Adelman and Ruggi (2016) argue that “[t]he wide range of differently gendered bodies and subjectivities that we can roughly place under the rubric of ‘transgender’ are generating new perspectives on embodied being” (p. 917). Dynamic embodiment captures a dynamic relationship between the body and identity, and accounts for how bodily experience is mediated/shaped by social norms.

Cuccio (2017) proposes a two-level account of embodiment which distinguishes between two different, but interconnected roles played by the body in cognition. Her framework has clear links to El Refaie's (2014, 2019) model of dynamic embodiment.

Cuccio (2017) distinguishes between the body schema and the body image. The body schema refers to the underlying system of sensorimotor processes that structure our engagement with the world, enabling perception and action to occur smoothly and automatically. The body image is defined as “a system of experiences, attitudes, and beliefs where the object of such intentional states is one's own body” (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 164). At the level of body image, the body contributes to our metaphorical cognition an object of explicit knowledge and attention. It is this explicit awareness of the body that gives rise to metaphorical mappings rooted in lived bodily experience.

This two-level account of embodiment is particularly relevant to metaphorical conceptualisations of gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria may involve moments in which embodiment shifts from body schema to body image, that is, from a backgrounded presence to a foregrounded object of attention. If the body is experienced as not aligning with one's gender identity, it ceases to be an unmarked vehicle for perception and instead becomes a site of emotional and conceptual dissonance. In addition, because the body image is shaped by sociocultural beliefs and norms, gender dysphoria can be understood as arising not only from the body itself (or particular bodily features), but also from culturally mediated beliefs associated with the body.

Thus, the outlined accounts by El Refaie (2014) and Cuccio (2017) demonstrate the importance of moving beyond a static conceptualisation of the body in metaphor analysis.

2.4. Framing

Despite its limitations, CMT remains extremely influential. Central to the theory is the idea that metaphors can shape cognition and reasoning — a phenomenon commonly described as metaphorical framing. The framing effects of metaphor have been widely studied, particularly in relation to how different metaphors can frame the same experience differently. However, far less attention has been paid to how metaphorical expressions themselves are evaluated by users, an issue that will be explored in Section 2.6 *Metaphor Evaluation*.

The following sections introduce the concept of framing, discuss its relationship to metaphor, and review empirical evidence for metaphorical framing effects.

The term “framing” has been applied within a variety of disciplines from sociology (Goffman, 1967) and semantics (Fillmore, 1985) through to artificial intelligence (Minsky, 1975) (Demjén & Semino, 2020, p. 216). Entman (1993) provides an oft-cited multidisciplinary definition of framing which can be applied to both written and spoken communication:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52).

The following section will explore the concept of framing in relation to metaphor and review the empirical evidence for the existence of metaphorical framing effects.

2.4.1. Metaphorical Framing

It has been suggested that metaphor is a powerful framing device (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Although Lakoff and Johnson (1980) do not explicitly use the term “framing”, they argue that the choice of a particular source domain can highlight some aspects of a target domain while hiding or backgrounding others. In later works, Lakoff (2001, 2004) does make explicit use of the term “framing” to demonstrate how metaphor can reinforce and reflect political viewpoints. Lakoff (2004) considers metaphorical framing in the context of political discourse, arguing that the conceptual metaphor A NATION IS A PERSON played a pivotal role in justifying bombing Iraq.

In *Metaphor and Thought* (Ortony, 1979) both Schön and Reddy also argue for the framing effects of metaphor. More specifically, Schön (1979) states that metaphor can be considered “a process by which new perspectives on the world come into existence” (p. 137). Schön (1993) applied these ideas to the context of social policy, arguing that the metaphors underlying topics of public-interest reflect particular viewpoints, and as a result, can influence the direction of decision making. In addition, he suggests that how a problem is framed determines both the nature and the limits of the solutions we find (Ritchie, 2013). Schön (1993) cites the example of housing, noting that squatting settlements in DC which were once described as “healthy” have since been referred to as “blighted” and “diseased”. The city planners believed the best course of action was the eradication of such settlements. Schön (1993) argues that if a competing metaphor was used, such as SLUMS ARE A NATURAL COMMUNITY (p. 145), a different solution would be proposed. Reddy (1979) further develops these ideas in his chapter on the CONDUIT metaphor for communication.

More recently, Cameron et al., (2010) have discussed the framing effect of systematic metaphors, stating that they frame the “ideas, attitudes and values of discourse participants” (p. 137).

2.4.2. Framework for Metaphorical Framings

There has been a move to develop a framework for analysing metaphorical framings. Semino, Demjén and Demmen (2018) propose that metaphors can be analysed for their framing implications at three levels of abstraction. At the highest level of generality are conceptual

metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) that may underlie a particular use of a linguistic metaphor. At a lower level of generality is the specific metaphor scenario(s) a linguistic metaphor is composed of (Musolff, 2006). At the lowest level of generality is the systematic metaphors (Cameron, 2010), metaphoremes, and discourse community-specific meanings, including evaluations and emotional associations, of a linguistic metaphor.

Metaphoremes are defined as “the bundle of stabilizing linguistic, semantic, pragmatic, and affective patterns in the use of the word as metaphor, together with its possibilities for variation” (Cameron & Deignan, 2006, p. 679). In other words, they refer to how figurative language use often stabilizes into highly restricted linguistic phrases, for example a phrase such as “walk away from” may come to metaphorically mean “to abandon an ongoing responsibility” (Deignan, 2017, p. 201). Metaphoremes emerge through repeated usage and are shaped by multiple interacting forces, including underlying conceptual metaphors, previous uses in the ongoing discourse, genre, register, and wider sociocultural influences. They can emerge at the level of an entire speech community, for example, the metaphorical use of the noun “baggage” in English to refer to emotional or psychological burdens (Demjén & Semino, 2017). They can also emerge at the level of specific discourse communities. For example, cancer patients in an online forum coined the expression “(playing) the cancer card” to refer to mentioning one’s diagnosis to avoid completing unwanted tasks (Demjén & Semino, 2017) (for further discussion of this example, see 2.5.8. *Dynamic Systems Theory and Metaphorical Creativity*). In cases such as these the metaphoremes may be temporary and restricted to a particular discourse context (Cameron & Deignan, 2006).

This framework highlights how conclusions about the framing effects of a metaphor should be drawn at each level of generality, which in turn “should prevent hasty decisions about whether certain metaphors are “good” or “bad”” (Demjén & Semino, 2020, p. 227-228). Thus, blanket rejections of particular source domains and the uncritical promotion of others could potentially deprive individuals of useful resources for making sense of coping with their experiences (Demjén & Semino, 2020).

More broadly, this framework demonstrates how cognitive and discourse-analytic approaches can be fruitfully combined to systematically investigate the framing implications of a metaphor

at different levels of schematicity (Demjén & Semino, 2020). Demjén and Semino (2020) argue that this is particularly important when analysing the metaphors used by or about vulnerable individuals “as the stakes are particularly high with regard to how such individuals are viewed or view themselves” (p. 228).

2.4.3. Empirical Evidence for Metaphorical Framing Effects

CMT encouraged scholars to start thinking about the role of metaphor in thought like never before and as a result influenced many empirical studies into the role of metaphor in cognition. This section will review a sample of empirical studies considering the role of metaphor in thought in the contexts of (i) social issues and (ii) health communication. In addition, the various factors which affect the influence of metaphors on reasoning will be outlined.

2.4.3.1. *Metaphorical Framing and Social Issues*

Recent experiments have demonstrated that linguistic metaphors can influence both thought and behaviour (Thibodeau, Hendricks & Boroditsky, 2017). Therefore, the metaphors used to talk about social issues such as crime, the economy, and immigration are highly important. This section will outline three metaphor framing studies which empirically investigate the role of metaphor in reasoning about social policy on crime, attitudes towards climate change, and opinions of political protests.

Crime: Beast versus Virus Metaphors

Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) investigated whether using different metaphors to talk about crime - ‘crime as a beast’ versus ‘crime as a virus’ - would cause people to think about crime differently and, as a result, propose different solutions to a fictional crime problem. In order to test this hypothesis, they created two versions of a report about increasing crime rates in the fictional city of Addison. In one version crime was metaphorically described as a virus *infecting* Addison, and in the other version crime was metaphorically described as a beast *preying* on Addison. The majority of the report was comprised of crime statistics, which were the same in both versions. Half the participants were given the report using the ‘crime is a virus’ frame, and the other half were given the ‘crime is a beast’ frame. The participants were asked to read the report and propose solutions. It was demonstrated that the metaphor the participants were

exposed to systematically influenced how they proposed solving Addison's crime problem. When crime was framed as a virus, participants suggested identifying the source of the problem and enacting social reform. Conversely, when crime was framed as a beast, participants proposed catching criminals and enforcing harsher laws. Thus, the solutions were in line with the metaphor's entailments.

In a follow-up experiment, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) decided to test whether exposure to a single word would have this same effect on reasoning. Thus, they modified the report, using only a single word to instantiate the metaphoric frame ("Crime is a *virus/beast* ravaging the city of Addison"). It was again found that different problem-solving suggestions offered were consistent with the entailments of the metaphor the participants were exposed to. This demonstrates that even the slightest instantiation of a metaphor via a single word can have a powerful effect on reasoning.

Interestingly, when asked about their decision-making process, the majority of participants did not recognize metaphors as influential in their decisions (only 3% cited the metaphor), instead citing crime statistics as being influential in their reasoning. This suggests that the influence of the metaphorical framing effect is covert.

Climate Change: War versus Race Metaphors

A study by Flusberg et al., (2017) investigated how metaphors can influence attitudes towards climate change. Participants were presented with a fictional newspaper article that described US efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as either (i) a metaphorical war against climate change, (ii) a metaphorical race against climate change, or (iii) non-metaphorically as the issue of climate change. Following this, participants responded to a series of follow-up questions about the urgency and risk of climate change and their willingness to change their behaviour to reduce their carbon footprint.

It was found that in comparison to the race-frame, the war-frame condition influenced the participants to perceive an additional sense of urgency and risk surrounding climate change and, as a result, they expressed a greater willingness to address it by modifying their conservation behaviour. Interestingly, participants who read the non-metaphorical article tended to respond in

between these two extremes. Again, this demonstrates that the metaphors an individual is exposed to can be influential on their reasoning.

Political Protests: Fire Metaphors

Another important function of metaphor is its role in media reporting, where it can contribute to the legitimisation and delegitimization of particular attitudes, behaviours and courses of action. Hart (2018) explores how the metaphor CIVIL DISORDER IS FIRE is used in discourses of social unrest.

It has been suggested that fire metaphors may encourage a negative evaluation of protests and protesters, based on our association of fire with danger and destruction (Charteris-Black, 2017, p. 22). Through a process of compression (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002), the fire frame can reduce the multiple causes of unrest into a single moment in time — a ‘spark’ (Hart, 2018). Since fire spreads naturally and inevitably, fire metaphors can remove human agency and naturalise instances of civil unrest (Hart, 2018, 2024). Thus, they can offer a depoliticised account of events by backgrounding the human motives of those involved (Hart, 2024).

The fire frame may also generate emotional responses by evoking a sense of danger, which may suggest that certain actions are logical or necessary. Since the prototypical way to control a fire is by means of water, the metaphor can make it seem reasonable to manage protests in the same way (i.e., through police deployment of water cannon) (Hart, 2024). Importantly, this course of action becomes legitimised not through the actual circumstances of the protest, but through metaphors used to describe it (Hart, 2018).

Hart (2018) conducted two experiments to test whether fire metaphors used in media texts influence perceptions of water cannon as a legitimate response to social unrest. In the first experiment, 237 participants were presented with an online news text about a political protest in the fictitious city of Sudfield. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (1) fire not present in the images or in the written text, (2) fire present in the images but not in the written text, and (3) fire present in the written text but not in the images. Results showed that the presence of images containing fire produced a framing effect in legitimating police use of water cannon compared to the base condition. However, the presence of fire metaphors in the written

text alone did not produce any significant framing effects, which is likely due to the presence of competing non-fire images in the co-text.

In the second experiment, images were removed, and 140 participants were given one of two texts reporting a recent protest in which the police deployed water cannon. The texts differed in that one contained fire metaphors while the other used equivalent literal expressions. It was found that participants presented with the metaphorical text were more likely to consider police use of water cannon as legitimate compared to those who read the literal version. These findings demonstrate that media representations, both linguistically and visually, can influence public opinion on important matters such as policing (Hart, 2018).

2.4.3.2 Metaphorical Framing and Health Communication

Metaphor's framing effect is particularly important when metaphors are used in relation to illness (Demjén & Semino, 2017). Previous research has demonstrated that language plays a central role in the practice and provision of healthcare, such that when used successfully it can facilitate positive experiences, improve information provision, and boost self-esteem (Semino et al., 2017, 2018). However, metaphors can also exacerbate negative emotions, such as anxiety and shame (Demjén & Semino, 2017).

One particular area of health communication that has received a substantial amount of scholarly attention is the metaphors used to speak about cancer and the consequences of this for patients. Bellicose (enemy and war) metaphors for cancer are particularly dominant within public discourse, health campaigns, and media representations of cancer within the United Kingdom and United States (e.g., 'I'm *fighting* cancer' or 'I'm *battling* cancer') (Hauser & Schwarz, 2014; Hendricks et al., 2018). Such metaphors are intended to motivate the public to "fight" against cancer and encourage them to adhere to beneficial health behaviours, often through evoking fear (Hauser & Schwarz, 2014).

However, several speakers have problematised the use of such metaphors as a result of their potentially disempowering entailments (e.g., Sontag, 1978, 1991; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004; Miller, 2010; Granger, 2014). They frame the cancer patient as at war with their illness and their own body, generating the implication that not recovering from the illness is a personal defeat

(Semino et al., 2018). Thus, these metaphors have the potential to be harmful as they can contribute towards a negative self-perception (Semino et al., 2018). This section will outline two studies which investigate the effects of using war/battle metaphors to conceptualise the experience of cancer.

Cancer: Enemy Metaphors

Enemy metaphors conjure up ideas of strength, power, and aggression (usually towards an external enemy) (e.g., Harrington, 2012; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004). As a result, they are well-suited to behaviours which require active engagement (Hauser & Schwarz, 2014). However, enemy metaphors are less applicable to self-limitation and restraint behaviours, as such behaviours are not compatible with the entailments of the metaphor (Hauser & Schwarz, 2014). Cancer prevention recommendations often promote limitation, such as avoiding alcohol, smoking, red meats, etc. They are very rarely characterized by active engagement in behaviours that are reminiscent of fighting against an enemy (Hauser & Schwarz, 2014).

Hauser and Schwarz (2014) hypothesized that metaphorically framing cancer as an enemy may impact people's understanding of the illness in unintended ways. For example, by encouraging people to favour aggressive treatment options (because one fights enemies aggressively) or by affecting engagement with prevention behaviours that are difficult to reconcile with the metaphor's entailments. Hauser and Schwarz (2014) conducted three studies investigating whether bellicose metaphors for cancer influence people's reasoning about the illness and their willingness to engage in a range of preventative behaviours.

The first study investigated whether the enemy framing affected the accessibility of self-limitation prevention behaviours. Sixty-four participants read a text about cancer: half received a text with an enemy metaphoric frame and the other half received a text with a neutral frame. In the enemy-frame condition, two additional words were present in the first sentence of the passage "Cancer is a broad group of diseases characterized by the *hostile* growth and *invasive* spread of abnormal cells" (p. 69) (italics added for emphasis). Participants were then asked what they would do to reduce their risk of cancer; in the enemy-frame condition, the prompt was rephrased as "what things [they] would do to fight against developing cancer?" (p. 69).

Coders then rated each response as to whether it was a self-limiting behaviour (limiting or avoiding a cancer-risk behaviour) or a self-bolstering behaviour (actions people engage in to lower cancer-risk). Participants who were exposed to the enemy metaphor were less likely to list self-limiting prevention behaviours relative to those exposed to the neutral frame condition. In addition, the enemy framing did not increase self-bolstering behaviour, this suggests that, contrary to popular belief, the enemy metaphor does not increase thoughts of beneficial behaviours.

The second and third studies investigated whether exposure to the enemy metaphor affects intention for various prevention, monitoring and treatment behaviours. Intuitively, it could be argued that exposure to the enemy framing would increase participation in behaviours that would help someone “fight” cancer (such as prevention, monitoring, and treatment). Thus, Hauser and Schwarz (2014) hypothesized that framing cancer as an enemy would lower participants’ intention to engage in self-limiting prevention behaviours.

The results of studies two and three support this hypothesis, much like in study one it was found that the enemy framing lowered intentions for self-limiting behaviours. Again, the enemy framing had no effect on self-bolstering behaviours. It also had no effect on monitoring intentions or treatment intentions. A concerning finding given that these are the primary reasons the enemy metaphor is advocated.

Thus, all three studies demonstrate that the enemy framing lessens intentions of self-limiting behaviours while remaining ineffective in encouraging active agentic behaviours as intended. Overall, these results led the authors to conclude that the use of enemy metaphors for cancer may be harmful for public health.

Cancer: Battle versus Journey Metaphors

A UK-based corpus project investigated the metaphors used to talk about cancer by patients, family carers and healthcare professionals. It was found that a range of different source domains were used to conceptualise the illness and its impact, including machines, restraint, and wholeness, but the most frequent were journey (e.g., “she’s on a breast cancer journey”) and violence (e.g., “she’s battling breast cancer”). This is perhaps unsurprising given that these

source domains are frequently employed to verbalise difficult enterprises in English. It has been suggested that these two source domains have different consequences for how the experience of cancer is framed; in battle metaphors, cancer is positioned as an opponent that must be defeated, whilst in journey metaphors cancer is presented as a path to be travelled along (Demjén & Semino, 2017).

It has been hypothesized that these two framings may influence a patient's perception of their illness, whereby the journey metaphor may encourage eventual acceptance, whilst the battle metaphor may cause a patient to view not recovering as a personal defeat (Demjén & Semino, 2017). A series of experiments by Hendricks et al., (2018) empirically tested this hypothesis.

Participants read a short vignette about an individual experiencing cancer. The illness was framed using either exclusively battle metaphors or journey metaphors. After reading the passage, participants were asked questions about the protagonist of the story, including “how likely was the protagonist to feel guilty that they had not done enough if they did not recover?” and “[h]ow likely were they to make peace with the situation?” (p. 267). Participants were given the opportunity to give additional information about the person's experience, allowing the researchers to access their understanding of the hardship experience.

The results demonstrated that participants believed the individual was more likely to feel guilty for not recovering when the battle frame was used than when the journey frame was used. In addition, participants who were exposed to the journey frame believed that the individual was more likely to make peace with their situation than those who were exposed to the battle frame. These findings support the hypothesis that the journey metaphor may have more positive implications than the battle metaphor (Hendricks et al., 2018).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the metaphors people are exposed to can influence the way they cope with hardship, including illness (Henricks et al., 2018).

2.4.4. Empirical Evidence Summary

It is important to caveat the above studies with the knowledge that a variety of moderating factors influence the strength of metaphorical framing effects, including strength of prior

attitudes and beliefs, knowledge of and interest in the source and target domains, native language, speaker credibility, and language processing, memory, and attention in metaphorical reasoning (Thibodeau, Hendricks & Boroditsky, 2017, p. 855; Flusberg, Holmes et al., 2024; 136).

Before making recommendations for policy and practice based on empirical research such as that presented above, it is important to acknowledge that the appropriateness of a given metaphor depends on many factors such as its context, producer, and specific linguistic realisation (Semino et al., 2018). Thus, whilst there is considerable evidence that violence metaphors for cancer can be harmful, for some individuals they can be an empowering way of conceptualising their illness and expressing personal determination (Semino et al., 2018). Reisfield and Wilson (2004) describe the case of a World War II historian who found it helpful to conceptualise his prostate cancer as a personal war. Thus, for this individual, familiarity with the source domain proved helpful. Conversely, journey metaphors which are often endorsed for capturing the notions of continuity and perseverance without the adversarial element found in violence metaphors, may nevertheless reinforce feelings of loneliness or powerlessness for some individuals (Semino et al., 2018). Thus, both violence and journey metaphors can be valuable in helping people express and come to terms with their experiences (Semino et al., 2018), echoing Teucher's (2003) observation that "metaphors can have different meanings for different people, or even different meanings for the same person at different times" (p. 13).

Demjén and Semino (2020) echo this in their consideration of cancer metaphors. They state that a "group of cancer patients choosing to refer to each other as "fighters" can be motivating, empowering and community building. However, the same metaphor used by charities or the media to refer to patients in general may be perceived as glorifying an antagonistic approach to the disease that some people may find unacceptable or inappropriate" (p. 228). Therefore, it is clear that the appropriateness of a particular metaphor depends on a multitude of factors and is highly dependent on their discursive context (De Backer et al., 2023).

Semino et al., (2018) emphasise the importance of "accepting and encouraging individual variation in metaphor use" (p. 155). This idea is shared by other linguists, such as El Refaie

(2019) who encourages people to create their own metaphors to help them make sense of their experiences.

2.5. Metaphorical Creativity

It is necessary to explore metaphorical creativity as the overwhelming majority of metaphors found in the Reddit dataset can be considered creative. To fully understand metaphorical creativity, it must firstly be positioned in relation to metaphorical conventionality. This section will then provide an overview of the various approaches attempting to operationalize creative metaphor use. The cognitive accounts of metaphorical creativity will firstly be discussed (namely, Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Integration or ‘Blending’ Theory) before the various approaches considering the manifestation of creative metaphors in discourse are summarized.

2.5.1. Metaphorical Conventionality versus Metaphorical Creativity

Metaphorical creativity is a somewhat difficult concept to define as the boundary between what counts as a conventional metaphor and what counts as a creative metaphor is not clear-cut (Deignan, 2005; Vega Moreno, 2007; Semino, 2008, 2010; Philip, 2017). However, it has been suggested that metaphors can be positioned on a ‘cline of conventionality’, ranging from deeply entrenched, conventionalised metaphors to novel one-off realisations (Kövecses, 2002; Philip, 2017). As metaphors operate at both the conceptual and linguistic level, the issue of conventionality concerns both conceptual metaphors and their corresponding linguistic expressions (Kövecses, 2002).

It has been suggested that while conventional metaphors may be effective in reflecting more ‘shared’ aspects of experiences, more idiosyncratic or intense emotional experiences are more likely to be conveyed using creative metaphor (Turner & Littlemore, 2023, p. 38). This is the case for the metaphors found in the current research, which can overwhelmingly be considered creative.

2.5.2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Metaphorical Creativity

Although Lakoff and Johnson (1980) largely focus on the highly conventional metaphorical expressions found in language and thought, they do reference the possibility of metaphorical creativity. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) recognise the possibility of creating entirely new conceptual metaphors via novel source-target mappings. They propose LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART as an example of a novel conceptual metaphor, which they argue provides a new understanding of our experience of love, as it has different entailments from existing conceptual metaphors for love, such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY (we'll just have to go our *separate ways*), LOVE IS MADNESS (I'm *crazy* about her), LOVE IS MAGIC (I'm *charmed* by her) or LOVE IS WAR (she *fought* for him) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 45-50). Unlike these well-established conceptual metaphors for love, this novel metaphor highlights the joint effort, dedication and cooperation needed to sustain a successful romantic relationship. Thus, the metaphor places direct responsibility on both partners and foregrounds the active aspects of romantic love whilst backgrounding its passive aspects. It could be argued that if lovers were to conceptualise their romantic relationship in terms of this metaphor, their experience would be very different to those who rely on more deeply entrenched, conventionalised metaphors for love (Kövecses, 2002).

Against this background, in their publication *More than Cool Reason*, Lakoff and Turner (1989) claim that the creative metaphors found within poetic language result from writers' creative exploitations of conventional conceptual metaphors. They propose that poets use four main devices to creatively exploit conceptual metaphors, namely extension, elaboration, questioning and composing (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). However, it has since been established that these devices are not restricted to poetic language as they can also be found within many other forms of language use (e.g., Kövecses, 2002; Deignan, 2005; Semino, 2008; Pérez-Sobrino et al., 2022).

Extending a conventional conceptual metaphor involves mapping an element of its source domain which is typically unused (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). For example, in Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To sleep? Perchance to dream! Ay, there's the rub; For in that sleep of death what

dreams may come?” the conventional metaphor DEATH IS SLEEP is extended by Shakespeare to include dreaming (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. 67).

Elaborating a conventional metaphor involves capturing an existing element of the source domain in an unusual or unconventional way (Kövecses, 2002). For example, Lakoff and Turner (1989) suggest that in Horace’s reference to death as the “external exile of the raft”, the notion of a vehicle from the DEATH IS DEPARTURE conceptual metaphor is elaborated in an unusual way through specifically referencing a “raft”.

Questioning involves pointing out or calling into question the appropriateness of common conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Kövecses, 2002). For example, in the verse “suns can set and return again,/ but when our brief light goes out,/ there’s one perceptual night to be slept through”, Catullus explicitly questions the appropriateness of the A LIFETIME IS A DAY conceptual metaphor and emphasises its limitations, namely it cannot account for mortality (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. 69). Arguably, the phenomenon of questioning constitutes a form of what has more recently been termed metaphorical resistance.

The final, and according to Lakoff and Turner (1989), most powerful form of creative exploitation is *composing* which involves the simultaneous employment of two or more conventional conceptual metaphors. Lakoff and Turner (1989) cite Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 as an example of this:

In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after the sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self that seals up all in rest.

In this quatrain, five conceptual metaphors operate simultaneously, LIGHT IS A SUBSTANCE, EVENTS ARE ACTIONS, LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION, A LIFETIME IS A DAY, and LIFE IS LIGHT to produce a complex and nuanced depiction of life and death.

In addition to the four ways of creatively exploiting conventional conceptual metaphors, Lakoff and Turner (1989) also discuss image metaphors. Image metaphors involve ‘one-shot’ mappings from one visual image to another. Thus, rather than mapping conceptual structures, one image is superimposed onto another, such as in “my wife ... whose waist is an hourglass” (p. 90), where the visual similarity between a woman’s waist and an hourglass is highlighted.

2.5.3. Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Context

Kövecses (2010) acknowledges that CMT cannot account for all instances of metaphorical creativity, particularly in cases where the source domain cannot be justified in terms of bodily experience. Thus, Kövecses (2010) argues that in addition to recruiting conceptual materials for the source domain from bodily experience (‘the pressure of embodiment’), as is the case with conceptual metaphors, the choice of source domain can also be determined by contextual factors (‘the pressure of context’). Thus, Kövecses (2010) proposes that there is an additional form of metaphorical creativity operating in discourse which he terms ‘context-induced’ creativity.

Kövecses (2010) distinguishes five contextual factors, which he argues lead to the production of unconventional and novel metaphors in discourse. These are as follows: (i) the immediate physical setting, (ii) what we know about the major entities participating in the discourse, (iii) the immediate cultural context, (iv) the immediate social setting, and (v) the immediate linguistic context itself (p. 663). For example, Kövecses (2010, p. 682-683) cites a subheading from the *USA TODAY* as an example of the effect of the immediate social setting on metaphor use. In 2007, the American newspaper wrote an article about Fats Domino, a musician based in New Orleans. In the article, the journalist describes how Domino’s life has been affected by hurricane Katrina, including the fact that his house was destroyed. The subtitle of the article reads: “The rock ‘n’ roll pioneer rebuilds his life—and on the new album ‘Goin’ Home,’ his timeless music” (*USA TODAY*, 2007, September 21). Kövecses argues that the conceptual LIFE IS A BUILDING metaphor “*rebuilds his life*” is triggered by the immediate social situation, as at the time of the interview, Fats Domino was in the process of rebuilding his house.

Other scholars have similarly noted the importance of context in considerations of metaphor use. For example, Koller (2004) discusses topic-triggered metaphors in which the choice of source domain is influenced by some aspect of the topic under discussion, and Semino (2008) discusses

situationally-triggered metaphors in which the choice of source domain is influenced by the communicative situation.

2.5.4. Conceptual Integration Theory and Metaphorical Creativity

It should be noted that some scholars have argued that the two-domain account offered by Conceptual Metaphor Theory is not always sufficient at accounting for metaphorical creativity (Kövecses, 2002, 2017; Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014; Pérez-Sobrino et al., 2022). Thus, there have been suggestions that the CMT-based approach should be supplemented by Conceptual Integration or ‘Blending’ Theory (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014; Kövecses, 2017).

Conceptual Integration Theory, developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) is a development of Mental Spaces Theory, and it was originally proposed to explain a wide range of phenomena including grammatical constructions, counterfactuals, analogy, and metaphor (Semino, 2010; Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). It constitutes an alternative cognitive account of metaphorical creativity.

Conceptual Integration Theory shares some similarities with Conceptual Metaphor Theory; both approaches involve conceptualizing one space (or domain) in terms of another (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). However, Conceptual Metaphor Theory is restricted to a unidirectional mapping from a source to a target domain, whereas Conceptual Integration Theory involves ‘blending’ multiple input spaces to form an emergent structure known as a ‘blend’. More specifically, a conceptual integration network minimally involves two input spaces (roughly corresponding to CMT’s source and target domain), a generic space which contains the structure shared by the input spaces, and a blended space containing the structure projected from the input spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). The blended space develops an emergent structure of its own when the blend is ‘run’ as the integration of the input spaces results in a new metaphorical construal of the target domain (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Thus, unlike Conceptual Metaphor Theory which places emphasis on establishing universals in language use, Conceptual Integration Theory focuses more on the online meaning construction of metaphors in discourse.

Fauconnier and Turner (2002) identify four types of blends: single-scope blends, double-scope blends, simplex blends, and mirror blends. Of these, single-scope and double-scope blends

account for ‘metaphoric integrations’ (p. 154). Single-scope blends represent conceptual metaphors (Dancygier, 2017). They involve blending structure from two input spaces; however, one of the two input spaces provides the primary organizing frame for the blend (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). Thus, the conceptual integration network for the ARGUMENT IS WAR conceptual metaphor would comprise an ‘Argument’ input space and a ‘War’ input space, whereby the ‘War’ (‘source’) input space would provide the primary organising frame as it is primarily structure relating to war which is projected onto the notion of arguments. Although the ‘Argument’ (‘target’) input shapes the blend, it does not control the topological structure of the blended space (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014).

Alternatively, in double-scope blends one single input does not provide the organizing structure for the blend. Rather, both input spaces contribute to the blended organizing structure (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). Fauconnier and Turner (2002) cite a ‘Debate with Kant’ scenario as an example of a double-scope blend. In this example, a contemporary philosopher discussing Kant in a lecture might use expressions such as “Kant disagrees with me on this point” and “I answer X to which he counters with Y” (p. 59-60). In this scenario there are two input spaces, one with the modern philosopher voicing his opinions of Kant’s theories, and another containing Kant’s writings. Crucially, there is not a debate in either input space, but through the integration of the two inputs a scenario is created in which the modern philosopher and Kant are engaged in a simultaneous debate. Thus, unlike in a single-scope blend where one input is reconstrued in terms of another, in this double-scope network both the modern philosopher and Kant are present, they are not fused into one individual (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014).

The multi-domain approach of blending theory does have its affordances as it can explain aspects of metaphorical meaning that cannot straightforwardly be accounted for in CMT terms (Grady et al., 1999). For example, in the metaphorical expression “this surgeon is a butcher” the surgeon is depicted as incompetent (Grady et al., 1999, p. 103). Upon initial inspection, it appears that the metaphor can be explained in terms of a CMT mapping from the source domain of butchery to the target domain of surgery (Grady et al., 1999). However, this unidirectional mapping cannot account for a central element of the metaphor’s meaning – that the surgeon is incompetent (Grady et al., 1999). Thus, blending theory is able to address this issue; partial structure from a butchery input space and partial structure from a surgery input space are blended, creating an

emergent structure in which the surgeon is depicted as incompetent. This interpretation arises as a butcher's goal is to sever an animal's flesh from its bones, whereas a surgeon's goal is to heal the patient. Thus, the merging of the means of butchery with the goal of surgery in the blended space generates the inference of incompetence (Grady et al., 1999).

2.5.5. Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Integration Theory as Complementary

Many scholars have suggested that the two conceptual approaches, Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Integration Theory, should be regarded as complementary (e.g. Grady et al., 1999; Semino, 2010).

For example, Semino (2010) combines aspects of both approaches to account for a particular form of metaphorical creativity involving the creation of 'unrealistic' scenarios. Semino (2010) explores how writers present unfamiliar versions of a familiar situations in order to accomplish particular rhetorical goals such as explanation or persuasion. Semino (2010) cites an example of this from Josef Joffe's (1999) newspaper article on European Monetary Union:

Think about trains where each car has its own engine and engineer. Either they all act as one, or the couplings will break and the train will derail. (*The Independent*, 1st January 1999)

Here, the creation of the unrealistic scenario can be accounted for by a double-scope blend in which structure from a 'Train' input space and structure from a 'European monetary union' input space are merged into a blended space (Semino, 2010). Clear correspondences emerge from both spaces, for example, the train corresponds to European monetary union, the different cars of the train correspond to the eleven countries forming Euroland, the train's engine corresponds to each country's economy, and the train's engineer corresponds to each country's government (Semino, 2010). Semino (2010) argues that the blended space inherits the majority of its organising structure from one of the two input spaces, namely the target input space (i.e., the 'European monetary union' input space). Thus, the pressure of trying to capture the multiple countries participating in European monetary union leads to the creation of an unrealistic scenario in which trains have multiple separate engines. As a result, this metaphor not only has the effect of simplifying a highly complex situation (giving it 'global insight' in Fauconnier and Turner's

(2002) terms), but it also attempts to make the readership view this situation from a particular ideological perspective (Semino, 2010). Semino (2010) demonstrates how Conceptual Metaphor Theory is relevant to the analysis of this scenario as some of the correspondences between trains and European monetary union rely on entrenched mappings from the conceptual event-structure metaphor.

2.5.6. Limitations of Conceptual Integration Theory

Although Conceptual Integration Theory is able to offer a strong account of metaphorical creativity, it has faced criticism for its ad-hoc approach towards analysis (Gibbs 2000; Coulson & Oakley, 2000; Semino 2019). This is because, on the basis of a linguistic example, one works backwards to formulate a conceptual integration framework to explain one's interpretation (Semino, 2019).

Moreover, Gibbs (2000) has argued that Conceptual Integration Theory is unconstrained as it accounts for multiple phenomena at varying levels of specificity, thus it should not be considered a single theory but rather a general framework. However, to narrow the scope of the theory and ensure that it is principled, Fauconnier and Turner (1998) proposed multiple 'optimality principles' under which blends function most effectively.

2.5.7. Metaphorical Creativity in Discourse

Having outlined cognitive approaches to metaphorical creativity, it is also important to consider approaches that emphasise how creative metaphors function within actual communicative contexts. Scholars within these discourse approaches suggest that four dimensions should be taken into account when analysing metaphorical creativity: (i) its linguistic form, (ii) its conceptual structure, (iii) its textual function or patterning within the discourse, and (iv) the norms and expectations of the genre and/or discourse community in which it appears (e.g., Semino, 2008; 2011; Pérez-Sobrino et al., 2022).

Semino (2008, 2011) has argued that a proper account of metaphorical creativity in discourse should *minimally* take the linguistic and conceptual levels of metaphor into account. For example, it is possible for a metaphorical expression to be creative at the linguistic level but not at the conceptual level if its metaphorical meaning is not lexicalised, but the metaphor can be

explained in terms of a conventional conceptual metaphor. This is the case with Lakoff and Turner's (1989) typology, as the four means of creative exploitation allow for the novel linguistic realisation of conventional conceptual metaphors. Alternatively, a metaphor can be creative at both the linguistic and conceptual levels if it consists of entirely novel conceptual mappings, as is the case with the LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). This distinction between the linguistic and conceptual levels of creativity is inherited from CMT.

In addition to analysing the linguistic and conceptual levels of metaphoricity, one can also consider creativity at the textual level. Semino (2011) suggests that the textual patterning of metaphorical expressions (i.e., repetition, recurrence, clustering, textual extension) could constitute a form of metaphorical creativity “even if the individual words contributing to the patterns are used in fairly conventional metaphorical senses” (p. 87).

Furthermore, it is important to consider how particular metaphorical expressions are used within a certain genre or discourse community as there are times when metaphorical creativity can only be accounted for in terms of the knowledge associated with the discourse community that creates and/or consumes particular text types (Pérez-Sobrino et al., 2022). This idea is discussed in further detail in the following section.

2.5.8. Dynamic Systems Theory and Metaphorical Creativity

Dynamic Systems Theory (Gibbs & Cameron, 2008) offers an alternate approach to explaining metaphorical creativity in naturally occurring discourse. This approach considers how various bodily, cognitive, linguistic, social, and cultural factors interact, shaping metaphor use. The purpose of this approach to metaphor is not to list every possible factor influencing metaphor production, but to recognize and account for how metaphor use is always continually shaped by a potentially infinite number of interacting influences (Demjén & Semino, 2017).

This is exemplified in Demjén and Semino's (2017) analysis of the metaphor “the ‘cancer card’” used by cancer patients in an online forum. The expression, which occurred 106 times in a single thread entitled “For those with a warped sense of humour WARNING – no punches pulled here”

was used to describe using one's cancer diagnosis to one's advantage in a variety of situations, including avoiding undesirable tasks such as gardening or making coffee.

Semino and Demjén (2017) investigate how the metaphor is collaboratively developed by contributors to the thread. Initially the metaphor is predominantly used by one contributor to describe how she mentions her diagnosis to avoid completing unwanted tasks, but over time there is a shift in the thread (known as a "perturbation" in dynamic systems terms) as other contributors begin to adopt and creatively adapt the metaphor. The cancer card metaphor comes to perform multiple functions including creating humour, expressing mutual support ("I'm glad you played a card"), and strengthening intimacy and group cohesion (Demjén & Semino, 2017, p. 197).

Semino and Demjén (2017) acknowledge that Conceptual Metaphor Theory can partly explain the metaphor's meaning, referencing related expressions such as "play the [X] card" where X tends to be a noun referring to a sensitive characteristic such as race or gender, and broader conceptual metaphors such as life is a game (Ching, 1993). However, they argue that these explanations do not fully account for the idiosyncratic way in which the metaphorical expression is used by contributors to the thread, arguing that a dynamic systems approach is able to better account for this data as it integrates cognitive and discourse-based perspectives (e.g. Cameron & Deignan 2006; Gibbs 2017; Gibbs & Cameron 2008). Furthermore, they highlight how metaphor use is shaped by both "downwards forces" (conceptual metaphors and cultural norms) and "upwards forces" (the goals of individual participants in specific interactions) in a process of "reciprocal causality" (Gibbs & Cameron 2008; Demjén & Semino, 2017). In this case, the shared goal of coping through humour constitutes one of the key upwards forces shaping metaphor use. The 'cancer card' develops into a group-specific metaphoreme (Cameron & Deignan, 2006).

Overall, this demonstrates the need to account for multiple interacting factors in order to do justice to the complex ways in which metaphors are used and develop in discourse, particularly in online interactions among tightly knit discourse communities. Here, the online forum itself could be considered a dynamic system which has developed its own conventions through which forum users are able to create a sense of solidarity and generate humour.

2.6. Metaphor Evaluation

The evaluative effects of metaphor have been widely studied, particularly in relation to how metaphors frame experiences in positive or negative ways. However, less research exists on how metaphors themselves are evaluated. This section therefore considers what makes a metaphor apt, successful, and appropriate, before considering how metaphor can be evaluated positively through metaphor endorsement and negatively through resistance.

2.6.1. Metaphor Aptness

Metaphor aptness refers to the fit of a source–target mapping, independent of the communicative context. That is, it is to do with whether a metaphor captures the key features of the target domain (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that a metaphor “works” when it satisfies the purpose of understanding one concept in terms of another (p. 97). Similarly, Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) describe a metaphor as “workable” when it has source and target domains that “match”, allowing for coherent mappings (p. 39). Tourangeau and Sternberg (1981) propose that aptness is dependent on the similarity of domain conceptualisations, that is, the source and target domains should be suitably similar. Apt metaphors are more easily understood than less apt metaphors (Jones & Estes, 2006). Thus, it is likely that metaphor aptness affects a metaphor’s persuasiveness (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023).

However, aptness in conceptual or linguistic terms does not necessarily ensure that a metaphor will be successful contextually/communicatively. A metaphor may be apt yet still fail to resonate with an audience or may even be considered highly inappropriate, or even immoral (Semino, 2021), such as metaphors which compare human beings to parasites or vermin (Musolff, 2010). This issue will be discussed further under 2.6.3 *Metaphor Appropriateness*.

2.6.2. Metaphor Success

Metaphor success refers to whether a metaphor achieves its intended communicative function in context. A metaphor’s influence is shaped by factors such as topic, genre, context of use, in addition to the goals of the speaker/writer, and the relationship between speakers/writers and listeners/readers (Semino, 2011, 2021; Semino et al., 2018). Successful metaphors often combine aptness with source domains that are familiar, accessible, and have a well-defined schematic

structure (Thibodeau, Hendricks, & Boroditsky, 2017; Thibodeau et al., 2019 in Flusberg, Holmes et al., 2024, p. 131).

Persuasiveness is one possible function of metaphor. If success is operationalised in persuasive terms, Landau et al., (2018) propose that a metaphor's persuasive effect depends on two interacting factors: source resonance and metaphoric fit. Source resonance captures the extent to which an individual's preexisting conceptions of a source domain affect how they process a target domain (Landau et al., 2018). In their study on skin cancer messaging, they found that individuals who strongly feared enemy confrontation responded more to metaphoric phrases and imagery comparing UV radiation to an aggressive sun pummeling their skin, showing increased worry about cancer risk and stronger intentions to use sun protection. Metaphoric fit concerns the extent to which a metaphorical framing of a problem and its proposed solution align conceptually, allowing knowledge from the source to be used to reason about the target (Landau et al., 2018, p. 136). Landau et al., (2018) found that metaphors were most persuasive when a problem and solution were framed using the same metaphor, compared to mismatched or literal framings. Together, these findings demonstrate that metaphors are most successful, in persuasive terms, when they both resonate emotionally with an individual's preexisting conceptions of the source and conceptually 'match' by providing a coherent mapping between problem and solution.

Moreover, the persuasive power of metaphor often depends on its ability to elicit an emotional or sensorimotor response. Littlemore (2019) found that metaphors typically evoke such responses when they are novel to the reader, presented from the reader's perspective, used in emotionally charged contexts, and involve movement (Perez-Sobrinio et al., 2021, p. 62). Similarly, in their meta-analysis of existing studies Sopory and Dillard (2002) found that extended and conventional metaphors, as well as those whose target domains were unfamiliar to the audience, were less persuasive than those that were unextended, novel, or based on targets familiar to the audience (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023, p. 314). Thus, if a metaphor is not apt, does not conceptually fit, or relies on an unfamiliar target domain it may not achieve the intended effect and may lead to metaphor resistance (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023, p. 314).

In the case of creative metaphors, success has been operationalised slightly differently. Sternberg and Lubart (1999) define creativity as “the ability to produce work that is both novel (...) and appropriate” (p. 47). This tension between originality and appropriateness is central to analysing metaphorical creativity (Perez-Sobrino et al., 2022).

In the context of advertising, Pérez-Sobrino et al., (2021) suggest that creative metaphors are most effective when they generate visceral responses – that is, the more a metaphor is felt, the more persuasive it is. However, they note that creative metaphor use carries a degree of risk, as interpretation depends heavily on a number of factors including the context in which it occurs (Deignan et al., 2013), the type of figurative communication used, the complexity of the messaging, in addition to individual differences such as age, gender, background knowledge and linguistic background (Littlemore, 2019; Perez-Sobrino et al., 2021).

2.6.3. Metaphor Appropriateness

It is also important to consider the ethical implications of metaphor use – this relates to whether a metaphor is appropriate in context. Some metaphors may be apt and successful, yet ethically problematic. For example, battle metaphors for cancer have been found to motivate some patients, but they also risk implying failure or blame when treatment is unsuccessful (Semino et al., 2018). In addition, metaphors that dehumanise or stigmatise entire groups may be rhetorically effective but are ethically unacceptable (Musolff, 2010; Semino, 2021). This demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between descriptive evaluations of metaphor success and evaluations of metaphor appropriateness.

To summarise, this discussion has suggested that metaphor success is a highly context-dependent phenomenon that can be measured using different parameters, including aptness, success in communicative and persuasive terms, and appropriateness.

2.6.4. Metaphor Endorsement

Alongside these dimensions of aptness, success, and appropriateness, it is also important to consider how metaphors are received by their audiences. Metaphors can be endorsed in two

ways: implicitly or explicitly³. I propose that implicit endorsement includes developing or reusing a metaphor in a way that is congruent with its original use, signalling acceptance or agreement without overt justification, whilst explicit endorsement refers to overtly praising or agreeing with a metaphor, often through the use of metalanguage.

Implicit Endorsement: Metaphor Development and Reuse

While early attempts to categorise metaphor development were made in literary contexts (e.g., Goatly, 1997), the most widely used framework for analysing naturally occurring discourse is Cameron's (2008, 2010) model of metaphor shifting. This model captures how a metaphor vehicle changes, develops, and adapts as text or talk proceeds. Cameron (2008) suggests that this occurs when speakers are engaged in spontaneous talk and connections are sparked in their minds which may divert them.

Cameron (2007, 2008) illustrates metaphor shifting in the context of conciliation talk between Patrick Magee, a former IRA member who planted a bomb in a UK hotel, and Jo Berry, whose father was killed in the attack. Their meetings were arranged at the request of Berry, who wanted to try to understand Magee's motivations behind the attack.

Cameron's (2008, 2010) framework identified three categories of metaphor shifting: vehicle redeployment, vehicle development, and literalisation. Vehicle and topic can be said to broadly correspond to source and target domains.

Vehicle Redeployment

Vehicle redeployment occurs when a vehicle is re-used to talk about a different topic. This is exemplified when Berry reads a line from a poem "I feel that my heart heals, as Ireland heals" and in response to this, Magee reuses the vehicle "heals" to refer to his own healing process ("my healing") (Cameron, 2008, p. 48-49). This process of reusing another speaker's metaphor

³ Declercq and van Poppel (2024) also make use of the terms implicit and explicit to describe responses to metaphor, distinguishing them by the extent to which a respondent overtly comments on a figurative expression. They consider explicit responses those in which the second speaker directly acknowledges or evaluates a metaphor, for example by asking for clarification, paraphrasing it, or commenting on it. Implicit responses involve alignment, uptake, or resistance that is not metalinguistically marked, including minimal responses, silences, laughter, or hesitations. These implicit behaviours can still constitute forms of endorsement or resistance. In contrast, I use explicit evaluation to refer to direct evaluative judgments of a metaphor and implicit evaluation to refer to the ways users develop, extend or reuse another participant's metaphor without overtly evaluating it.

with a changed topic can be referred to as ‘appropriation’ (Wertsch 1998), a term originating from socio-cultural theory (Cameron, 2008). It has also been referred to as recontextualisation by Semino et al., (2013).

Vehicle Development

The second form of metaphor shifting is vehicle development which occurs when a vehicle is used with the same or a closely related topic. Cameron (2010) distinguishes between four types of metaphor development:

- (1) Repetition, where the vehicle term is repeated in an identical or transformed form. For example, “see” is repeated in the past tense form, “saw” (Cameron, 2008, p. 55);
- (2) Relexicalization, where a near-synonym of the vehicle term is used. For example, “separate” is relexicalized as “detached” (Cameron, 2007, p. 212);
- (3) Contrast, where an antonym or contrasting term for the vehicle term is used. For example, “a whole picture” is contrasted with “a glimpse” (Cameron, 2008, p. 55);
- (4) Explication, where a vehicle is expanded, elaborated or exemplified. For example, when reading her poem, Berry compares conciliation to building a bridge. After hearing this reading Magee talks about “coming to a bridge with two ends” (Cameron, 2008, p. 56). Here, Magee elaborates the bridge to have two ends, potentially to distance himself from Berry or her statements (Cameron, 2008). This elaboration forces a topic shift from conciliation to the two different starting points of the interactants (Cameron, 2008).

Extensive explication of a metaphor vehicle can result in an extended metaphor. If this occurs over a long period of time this can lead to the production of a systematic metaphor (Cameron, 2010).

Literalisation

The final form of metaphor shifting is literalisation, this is when a vehicle is used non-metaphorically to refer to a topic. Cameron (2008) illustrates this with Berry’s statement “I saw very clearly that the end of that journey would be sitting down and talking to the people who did it” (p. 58). Here, the ‘bridge term’ (Kittay 1987, p. 166) is “sitting down” as it can apply to both the vehicle and topic. People reaching the end of a journey may sit down to rest and people

involved in conciliation may sit down to talk to each other. Thus, shifting the metaphor into the literal world (Cameron, 2008).

Mathieson et al., (2015) also developed a framework for analysing metaphor development. Notably many of their categories overlap with Cameron's (2008, 2010) category of vehicle development, however, their model also includes clarification and explicit positive evaluation.

Their framework consists of five categories:

- (1) Repetition, which is also found in Cameron's (2008, 2010) model;
- (2) Rephrasing, which corresponds to Cameron's (2008, 2010) relexicalization;
- (3) Clarification, where the meaning of a source domain is clarified to create shared understanding;
- (4) Elaboration/extension, where the additional implications of a metaphor are teased out or extended. This corresponds to Cameron's (2008) explication. Notably, Mathieson et al., (2015) subsume literalisation under this category as they found literalisations difficult to delineate from other extensions.
- (5) Praise of/agreement with the metaphor, which captures explicit positive evaluations of metaphor use.

A final framework for metaphor reuse was developed by Tay (2014) based on therapeutic interactions. Tay (2014) identifies two types of reuse: consistency and variability. Consistency refers to "neighbouring metaphoric expressions which evince pursuit of the inferences/entailments of an introduced source-target association" (p. 108). In simple terms, consistency occurs when the same metaphorical framing is extended rather than switching to a new one. It aligns closely with Cameron's (2008) concept of vehicle development. Variability, on the other hand, involves metaphorical expressions that (i) vary in source domain, (ii) vary in target domain, or (iii) alternate between both sources and targets (Declercq and van Poppel, 2024, p. 170). The first type of variability corresponds to the process of reframing (Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020), while the second type corresponds to Cameron's (2008) vehicle redeployment.

Explicit Endorsement

The previous section presented the existing research on implicit endorsement, when a metaphor is reused or developed in a way that is congruent with its original use. This section will focus on explicit endorsement which occurs when metaphors are overtly evaluated through praise or agreement. This phenomenon has received little attention and has primarily been studied in therapeutic contexts.

For example, Mathieson et al., (2015) investigated metaphor co-construction in twelve cognitive behaviour therapy sessions treating depression, analysing how shared metaphoric language develops between clients and therapists. Drawing on the discourse dynamics approach (Cameron & Maslen, 2010), they examined three speaking turns following each metaphor to capture potential responses (following Hill & Regan, 1991). From this analysis, they identified five common initial responses to client metaphor use: (1) repetition, (2) rephrasing, (3) clarification, (4) elaboration/extension and, (5) praise of/agreement with the metaphor (p. 9).

The final category of explicit praise of/agreement with the metaphor constitutes a form of explicit endorsement, yet only two examples of this category were provided. Namely, a speaker saying, “that’s a really good metaphor” (p. 5) and “Yeah that is a really good analogy” (p. 7). Both examples make use of metalanguage, but Mathieson et al., (2015) do not clarify whether an interactant needs to make explicit use of metalanguage for inclusion in this category. This raises important methodological questions about how explicit endorsement can be consistently identified across different discourse contexts.

Another study considering metaphor endorsement in the context of therapy sessions is Sims and Whynot’s (1997) exploration of family-generated metaphors in therapy. The authors briefly note the value of therapists “validating and highlighting” clients’ metaphors (p. 1) and encourage them to praise these metaphors to foster sessions which are “rich in associations” (p. 3).

Although much of the research on metaphor endorsement has focused on the specific discourse context of therapy sessions, many of the central tenets of these studies are transferable to other contexts. Importantly, while the literature has established that endorsement occurs, it has not yet explored *why* certain metaphors are endorsed. Both of the above studies do not consider which

specific aspect(s) of a metaphor are responded to positively. Metaphors can be endorsed in different ways and along different dimensions – a metaphor may be praised for its choice of source domain, its creativity, or its conciseness. This level of detail is missing from existing accounts and will be addressed in this thesis.

2.6.5. Metaphor Resistance

Resistance is the act of “resisting, opposing, or withstanding someone or something” (OED, 2023). In the context of metaphor, it refers to “any form of opposition to the use of metaphor in a given context” (Wackers, Plug & Steen, 2021, p. 69). Resistance to metaphor can be expressed both verbally and non-verbally, for example by refusing to pick up on a metaphor used by someone else (Wackers et al., 2021).

Metaphor resistance can be partial when a particular aspect of a metaphor is rejected, or complete, when metaphorical language is resisted altogether (Gibbs & Siman, 2021). Metaphors can be resisted as a general strategy due to a preference for literal language, or particular metaphors may be resisted when used in specific situational or discursive contexts (Gibbs & Siman, 2021). For example, empirical evidence has found that metaphorical framings are particularly likely to be resisted when they conflict with an individual’s personal beliefs. In Hart’s (2021) study, extreme dehumanising metaphors and militarising metaphors used in immigration discourse were actively resisted and reduced support for the restrictive immigration policies they were intended to legitimise. Participants cited both their prior attitudes to immigration and the negative language used as motivating their reasoning.

It has been argued that there is a need to consider metaphorical resistance in accounts of metaphor use (Gibbs & Siman, 2021). This section provides a systematic overview of existing approaches to metaphor resistance, focusing particularly on argumentative resistance, namely, explicit resistance to metaphor which is supported by arguments (Wackers, Plug & Steen, 2021; van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023).

An early contribution is Lakoff and Turner’s (1989, p. 69) category of questioning, which can be understood as a form of resistance. Questioning involves calling into question the adequacy or appropriateness of a conventional metaphor. Although Lakoff and Turner (1989) discuss

questioning primarily as a poetic technique, it can be applied to all forms of metaphorical language where speakers challenge metaphorical framings. Therefore, it can be understood as an early account of metaphorical resistance.

Dynamic Systems Approach towards Metaphor Resistance

Gibbs and Siman (2021) adopt a dynamic systems approach to account for metaphor resistance, viewing it as a multifactorial, dynamic phenomenon. They argue that it is shaped by multiple intersecting constraints ranging from personal preferences to political, ideological, social, historical, and aesthetic contingencies. They note that resistance may occur over various timescales and can occur at either an individual or collective level (for example, when scientific communities or scholars challenge particular metaphorical constructs). Moreover, they also theorise that metaphor resistance may have its roots in embodied experience, much like other forms of metaphorical thinking.

Gibbs and Siman (2021) identify a range of contexts in which metaphors may be resisted, including public discourse (e.g., political discourse), experiments, and scientific discourse. They also highlight the potential for ironic resistance as language users may consciously resist the implications of a metaphor while simultaneously being governed by that very metaphor in their everyday thought processes (Gibbs & Siman, 2021). They also acknowledge that resistance to metaphor can be partial when a particular aspect of a metaphor is rejected (such as its sensory-motor components, emotional valence, aptness, specific linguistic realisation, or cultural implications) or complete (when a user expresses a suspicion of metaphor or a preference for literal language).

While this approach successfully captures the dynamic and emergent nature of metaphor resistance, it does not offer a comprehensive typology for categorising the various forms of metaphor resistance that emerge in authentic discourse. The following sections will provide an overview of the existing typologies for metaphor resistance.

Combined Metaphor and Argumentation Theoretical Approach to Metaphor Resistance

Another approach to accounting for metaphor resistance combines van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (1982, 2004) pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation with Steen's (2008,

2011) three-dimensional model of metaphor (e.g., van Poppel, 2018; Renardel de Lavalette, Andone & Steen, 2019a; Renardel de Lavalette, Andone & Steen, 2019b; van Poppel, 2020; Wackers, Plug & Steen, 2021). Within this approach, metaphor resistance is analysed not only in terms of a metaphor's underlying argumentation structure and argumentation scheme, but also with reference to its linguistic, conceptual, and communicative dimensions. The strength of this combined approach lies in its ability to explain resistance standpoints both in terms of the nature of the proposition they express and the specific metaphor dimension that forms the target of resistance. This enables researchers to more precisely pinpoint the particular aspect of metaphor use that a language user is resisting. This approach has been applied to different contexts, a sample of which will be explored in further detail below, following an introduction to the three-dimensional model of metaphor (Steen, 2008, 2011) and pragma-dialectical argumentation theory (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1982, 2004).

The Three-Dimensional Model of Metaphor

Steen (2008, 2011) proposed a three-dimensional model of metaphor. While existing approaches have primarily focused on the conceptual dimension of metaphor (metaphor in thought) and the linguistic dimension of metaphor (metaphor in language), Steen argues for the integration of the communicative function of metaphor as a separate, third dimension of metaphor. At the conceptual level, metaphors involve understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another (e.g., understanding illness through the domain of warfare). At the linguistic level, metaphors are realised through particular metaphorical expressions (e.g., “fighting cancer” or “battling depression”). At the communicative level, metaphors may or may not function as metaphors between speaker and addressee, depending on whether the source domain serves as a distinct domain of reference (Steen, 2017; cf. deliberate metaphor theory). In addition, Steen (2008) considers how different types of metaphors can be distinguished according to these dimensions. For example, novel versus conventional metaphors on the conceptual level, direct versus indirect metaphors on the linguistic level, and deliberate versus non-deliberate metaphors on the communicative level (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023, p. 312).

It is argued that whilst all metaphors have conceptual, linguistic, and communicative dimensions, a resistance standpoint may focus more explicitly on one than the others (Wackers et al., 2021).

Pragma-Dialectical Theory of Argumentation

The pragma-dialectical approach conceptualises argumentation as a goal-oriented activity aimed at resolving a difference of opinion through testing the acceptability of a standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2003). Argumentation is defined as “a social, intellectual, verbal activity serving to justify or refute an opinion, consisting of a constellation of statements and directed towards obtaining the approbation of an audience” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 1). This definition comprises two key ideas. Firstly, argumentation involves defending or attacking a standpoint (formally referred to as attempted justification or attempted refutation). Secondly, the success of a speaker’s (or writer’s) argumentation depends on the audience's reaction (van Eemeren et al., 2014). Thus, argumentation is considered to be “an attempt at convincing” one’s audience of the acceptability of a particular standpoint through the use of supporting arguments (van Eemeren et al., 2014, p. 70).

The pragma-dialectical approach compares authentic argumentative discourse against the ideal model of critical discussion i.e., “how argumentative discourse would be structured if it was solely aimed at resolving a difference of opinion” (Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019a, p. 724). The model comprises four stages a discussion has to go through in order to test the standpoint at issue:

- (1) The confrontation stage in which the difference of opinion is established;
- (2) The opening stage in which the starting points are established;
- (3) The argumentation stage in which the argumentation is proposed and subject to resistance;
- (4) The concluding stage in which the outcome of the exchange is determined

(van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2003, p. 366)

Thus, the comparison of authentic argumentative discourse against the ideal model can uncover the argumentative function of the different contributions made during a debate, including instances of metaphor resistance (Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019a).

The pragma-dialectical approach recognizes that argumentation occurs within a particular social context (van Eemeren et al., 2014). Some activity types may be governed by explicit rules for

argumentation, such as court cases or parliamentary debates (Wackers et al., 2021). Conversely, more informal activity types, such as conversations between friends or online fora, may be characterised by more informal social conventions regarding the exchange of arguments (Wackers et al., 2021). Such communicative contexts are dynamic and their rules are open to change (van Eemeren et al., 2014).

Pragma-dialectical argumentation theory further distinguishes between three types of propositions that can be expressed within a standpoint: evaluative, descriptive, and prescriptive (van Eemeren et al., 2014). When applied to metaphor resistance, these categories help specify the *nature* of the opposition being expressed (Wackers et al., 2021).

- (1) An evaluative resistance standpoint conveys a personal judgement of a metaphor;
- (2) A descriptive standpoint appeals to facts or evidence to resist a metaphor;
- (3) A prescriptive standpoint goes further by encouraging or discouraging the use of a particular metaphor. Thus, prescriptive standpoints not only challenge another party's view of a metaphor but also aim to influence their behaviour

(Wackers et al., 2021)

Applications of the Combined Metaphor and Argumentation Theoretical Approach towards Metaphor Resistance

Combining insights from the three-dimensional approach and pragma-dialectical argumentation theory allows researchers to locate the exact dimension and argumentative function of metaphor resistance in discourse. This section provides an overview of how this combined theoretical framework has been applied in research on metaphor resistance.

Metaphors for Cancer

Wackers, Plug and Steen (2021) apply the combined framework to explore how violence metaphors for cancer are resisted, aiming to determine which aspects of their use are deemed inapt or inappropriate by language users. They analysed six case studies taken from a corpus of public discussions on the use of violence metaphors for cancer to examine the different types of resistance standpoints expressed in critical responses (evaluative, descriptive, and prescriptive) as well as the metaphor dimensions these standpoints focus on (conceptual, linguistic and

communicative). All of the analysed examples were written by former cancer patients (Wackers, Plug & Steen, 2021).

The six case studies analysed by Wackers, Plug and Steen (2021) have been presented in Table 1 which includes their categorisation based on their standpoint type and dimension of metaphor addressed.

Table 1. Standpoints of resistance and metaphor dimensions addressed (adapted from Wackers, Plug & Steen, 2021 p. 72-75)

Standpoint Type	Metaphor Dimension Addressed	Quotation
Evaluative resistance standpoint	Conceptual dimension of metaphor	“On the ‘weenie’ side, I guess this means I am not ‘fighting’ cancer like a tough guy. To heck with that. That bout is rigged.”
Prescriptive resistance standpoint	Linguistic and communicative dimensions of metaphor	“For crying out loud, don’t call me a warrior.”
Descriptive resistance standpoint	Linguistic and communicative dimensions of metaphor	“The trouble with using [metaphors such as ‘battle’ and ‘fight’] to describe cancer is it puts the burden of healing on patients by turning them into winners and losers.”
Evaluative resistance standpoint	Conceptual dimension of metaphor	“I don’t like the idea of being a warrior. I don’t see cancer as a battle, because I don’t want to be at war with myself [sic].”
Implicit prescriptive resistance standpoint	Linguistic dimension of metaphor	“I wish people would stop using clichés [about cancer]. ‘You are so brave’, ‘You are a warrior’ [...]”
Evaluative resistance standpoint	Communicative dimension of metaphor	““No surrender!’ [...] I can’t stand it when people compare cancer to a fight.”

These examples demonstrate that the different standpoints reveal differing levels of commitment and argumentation. While an evaluative standpoint expresses a personal opinion or judgement, a prescriptive standpoint calls for behavioural change. In addition, the different dimensions of metaphor highlight whether resistance is focused on the idea (conceptual), the phrasing (linguistic), or the interactional use of a metaphor (communicative). Several examples span more

than one category, reflecting the potentially problematic nature of neatly categorising metaphor resistance. Wackers et al., (2021) note that researchers may not always have sufficient contextual information to make a sound judgement regarding the type of resistance or metaphor dimension forming the primary target of resistance. Nevertheless, their analysis demonstrates how this combined approach can be applied to authentic language use, providing useful insight into the motivations behind metaphor resistance.

Metaphors in Political Discourse: Parliamentary Debates

The combined model has also been applied to parliamentary debates as they provide a rich source for exploring metaphor resistance. In these settings, metaphors may have entailments and presuppositions that do not align with the values of all discussion parties; therefore, they are often resisted to better align with speakers' interests and motivations (Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019a).

Figurative Analogies

Renardel de Lavalette et al., (2019b) investigate how legislators frame their arguments using figurative analogies, a type of metaphor in which concepts from two different conceptual domains are compared, and they explore the various ways in which these analogies are resisted by the opposition.

Their analysis of British Public Bill Committee (PBC) debates on the Educational Bill of 2010-2011 focused on exchanges in which the Government and Opposition members debated the acceptability of a proposed bill. For example, a legislator may compare “issuing a yellow card in response to a minor offence by a football player” to “issuing an official warning to a charity in response to a minor breach” to generate the implicature that receiving an official warning is a harmless measure, much like a yellow card carries no immediate consequences (Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019b, p. 108). However, this comparison is misleading, as official warnings can have serious legal and reputational ramifications. Such figurative analogies can therefore oversimplify complex issues and make controversial conclusions appear obvious (Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019b). Thus, the authors argue that the ability to resist such figurative analogies by advancing counter-argumentation is a necessary skill for politicians.

In addition, they identified two main forms of resistance to figurative analogies in their dataset; political opponents either attacked the comparison itself by pointing out differences between the compared concepts or critiqued the target domain of the analogy. They argue that the combined metaphor-theoretical and pragma-dialectical approach provides the most comprehensive account of both the metaphorical and argumentative properties of these figurative analogies and their resistance.

Metaphorically Expressed Starting Points

In a second study, Renardel de Lavalette et al., (2019a) investigate how metaphors are used to express starting points and the argumentative criticisms used to resist them in British Public Bill Committee debates. In pragma-dialectical terms, a starting point refers to the shared assumptions between discussion parties regarding the rules of the debate or the concessions on the basis of which a standpoint will be defended (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 60 as cited in Renardel De Lavalette et al., 2019a). Politicians may strategically frame starting points in metaphorical terms to introduce perspectives on a debated topic that serves their own argumentative goals (Renardel De Lavalette et al., 2019a). In contrast, opponents may try to resist these metaphorically expressed starting points by advancing argumentative criticisms to create a point of departure that is more favourable to them (Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019a).

Drawing on pragma-dialectical argumentation theory (van Eemeren & Gootendorst, 1992) and Steen's (2008) three-dimensional model of metaphor, Renardel de Lavalette et al., (2019a) analyse case studies from debates on the Welfare Reform Bill (2010-2012) and the Education Bill (2010-2011). More specifically, they employ the ideal model of a critical discussion and the dialectical profile of the 'opening stage' of a discussion (van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans, 2007) to identify the argumentative properties of metaphorically expressed starting points and their resistance.

Three techniques which can be used to counter metaphorically expressed starting points were identified:

- (1) Critically extending a metaphor to put forward a counterproposal for a starting point that is more beneficial to the adversary;

- (2) Resisting a metaphor by emphasising the differences between the two compared concepts, thus preventing further use of the metaphor in the debate, and
- (3) Rejecting a metaphorically expressed starting point by repeating the metaphorical expression used in the original starting point.

(Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019a, p. 734)

These strategies reveal that metaphors are powerful tools used in shaping the opening stage of a debate. Conversely, resisting such metaphors allows opponents to reassert control over the framing of an issue. It should be noted that such techniques are extremely specific to the political activity type under consideration.

The authors (2019a, 2019b) acknowledge the limitations of their analyses of both figurative analogies and metaphorically expressed starting points, noting that their case studies do not constitute an exhaustive account of possible strategies of metaphor resistance. For example, figurative analogies can also be resisted by other means such as extending a figurative analogy to reach the opposite conclusion (cf. Juthe, 2016).

Developing the Combined Pragma-Dialectical and Metaphor-Theoretical Approach

Van Poppel and Pilgram (2023) developed a typology of resistance that integrates Steen's (2008, 2011) three-dimensional model of metaphor and van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (2004) pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation with Krabbe and van Laar's (2011) framework for critical reactions. Their aim is to analyse how metaphors are explicitly resisted, focusing particularly on metaphors used in argumentative discourse where metaphors are used to persuade interlocutors to change their attitude and/or behaviour.

Van Poppel and Pilgram (2023) focus particularly on the communicative dimension of metaphor. They analyse deliberate metaphors as they "have a clear argumentative purpose and are typically linguistically marked; therefore, they may also be more prone to criticism and resistance" (p. 313). From a pragma-dialectical perspective (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, 2004), metaphors are treated as contributing to different argumentative moves including standpoints, supporting arguments, and starting points (cf. Renardel de Lavalette et al., 2019a). Each of these

moves can be subject to critique, and resistance to metaphor can therefore occur at various points in an argumentative exchange.

To systematically analyse how metaphors are explicitly resisted, van Poppel and Pilgram (2023) adapt Krabbe and van Laar's (2011) model of critical reactions, which was originally developed to describe how interlocutors respond to argumentative moves more generally. Krabbe and van Laar (2011) distinguish four parameters of critical reactions: the focus of the reaction, the norm to which it appeals, its illocutionary force, and the level of dialogue at which it occurs. Since their aim was to identify why a metaphor is resisted rather than how the criticism is expressed, van Poppel and Pilgram (2023) consider only the first two parameters: focus and norm.

Focus of a Critical Reaction

The focus of a critical reaction consists of two dimensions: the type of move and the aspect of move that a reaction targets. A metaphor can form part of a move when used indirectly, an entire move when used directly (e.g., a simile or explicit metaphorical comparison), or a combination of moves when extended (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023). For a further discussion of direct and indirect metaphors see 3.5.1.1 *MIPVU: Direct and Indirect Metaphors*.

Following Krabbe and van Laar (2011) the aspect of a move addressed in a critical reaction may be:

- (1) **Propositional:** Criticism is directed at the content of a proposition. With regard to metaphor, criticism can either be directed at the material premise (how the target domain is represented) or the connecting premise of the argument (the correspondences between the source and target domain) (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023). Such reactions often concern the aptness of a metaphor.
- (2) **Locutional:** Criticism is focused on the formulation of the metaphor itself, focusing on issues such as clarity, appropriateness, or taste. For example, a metaphor might be perceived as unclear, ambiguous, or offensive (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023).
- (3) **Personal:** Criticism is directed at the person producing the metaphor. A speaker/writer may be accused of lacking the authority or experiential knowledge to use a particular metaphor (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023).

- (4) Situational: Criticism concerns the appropriateness of a metaphor in light of the context in which it is produced (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023).

Norm Appealed to in the Critical Reaction

In addition to considering the focus of a critical reaction, van Poppel and Pilgram (2023) also consider the norms to which a critical reaction appeals. Following Krabbe and van Laar (2011), three types of norms are distinguished:

- (1) Discussion Rules: This norm relates to the pragma-dialectical rules for conducting a reasonable, constructive discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). They determine whether a metaphor contributes to, or hinders, the resolution of a difference of opinion (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023). It should be noted that appeals to discussion rules can be difficult to identify as they are not always referred to explicitly in the discourse (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023);
- (2) Institutional Norms: These norms concern the (in)appropriateness of (a) metaphor in a given context. For example, in certain contexts, it may be inappropriate to use source domains that are sensitive (e.g., WAR) or to even use metaphors at all (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023)
- (3) Norms for Optimality: These norms distinguish between metaphors that are used well and those which are used unsatisfactorily (i.e., metaphors which are not as successful as they could have been in achieving the producer's goals). For example, a metaphor could be considered unsatisfactory if it makes use of an unfamiliar source domain or has limited aptness or fit (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023).

Table 2. Van Poppel and Pilgram's (2023) typology of resistance to metaphor (p. 318)

Parameter	Subcategory	Type of Resistance
Focus: Type of move	Part of move	Metaphorical expression is called out.
	Single move	Entire argument, standpoint or starting point that is presented by means of a metaphor is called out.
	Constellation of moves	A stretch of argumentative discourse in which a metaphor is extended is called out.
Aspect of move	Propositional	Domain is not represented correctly or no relevant similarities between domains.
	Locutional	Move is not understandable, e.g., unclear what mappings should be made between domains.
	Personal	Person performing the move is not in the position to express move on these particular domains.
	Situational	Metaphor is not appropriate in this context; metaphor use may have negative consequences.
Norms	Discussion rules	Metaphor contains fallacy, e.g., false analogy.
	Institutional	Move contains fault e.g., metaphor is not allowed/expected in this context.
	Optimality	Move contains blunder, e.g., opponent is not familiar with the source domain.

Application of van Poppel and Pilgram's (2023) Approach

Van Poppel and Pilgram (2023) applied their framework to a corpus of Twitter replies responding to a *Channel 4 News* post quoting former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's metaphor comparing COVID-19 to an "invisible mugger". The metaphor, used during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, was intended to encourage public compliance with the implemented measures and restrictions, but instead provoked substantial criticism online, providing a rich source for analysing metaphor resistance.

Each response in the dataset was coded according to the two parameters of focus and norm. The authors found that propositional resistance was the most frequent. This form of resistance critiqued the similarity of the domains compared, specifically, the objection that a virus lacks a sense of purpose unlike a mugger. The norm most frequently appealed to was that of discussion rules as Twitter users questioned the acceptability and truthfulness of Johnson's statements and requested further justification. Van Poppel and Pilgram (2023) note that this aligns with the communicative norms of Twitter in which users expect statements to be truthful and perhaps open to challenge.

Their analysis demonstrated that resistance to metaphor can focus on the formulation, premise, person, or situational context in which a metaphor is used (van Poppel and Pilgram, 2023). However, the authors also found that Krabbe and van Laar's framework (2011) did not capture all forms of resistance in their corpus. To address this, they introduced an additional category of metaphor resistance, 'general resistance', defined as resistance to figurative language in general rather than to a specific metaphor.

When applying the typology, the authors encountered several analytical challenges. They noted that it was not always clear how to categorise the critical reactions as a single response could contain several moves at once. In some cases, there was insufficient context to determine what aspect of the metaphor was being criticised. Moreover, the three types of norms (discussion rules, institutional norms, and optimality norms) often overlapped or depended on one another, complicating their differentiation.

Finally, the authors emphasize that their typology is deliberately limited in scope. It focuses solely on explicit resistance to argumentatively used metaphors, thereby excluding other forms of resistance such as implicit or unconscious resistance (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023, p. 326).

Metaphor Resistance Summary

As this section has demonstrated, resistance to metaphor can occur due to a multitude of reasons – including a preference for literal language, a rejection of clichés and conventions, and resistance to the (potentially harmful) implications of a metaphor (e.g. Lakoff; 2002; Hart, 2018; Gibbs and Siman, 2021; Finsen, Steen & Wagemans, 2021). Metaphor resistance can be partial,

focusing on a specific aspect of a metaphor, such as its linguistic realisation, or complete. Finally, the extant approaches accounting for metaphor resistance have been outlined and their respective strengths and weaknesses have been considered.

2.6.6. A Framework for Metaphorical Endorsement and Resistance

Declercq and van Poppel (2024) developed a framework that accounts for both metaphor endorsement and resistance based on their analysis of sixteen chronic pain consultations. Their model was developed to investigate how metaphors are responded to, taken up, reused, further developed, renegotiated and resisted in interactions between healthcare professionals and patients in a Belgian pain clinic. It combines insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory, MIPVU and interactional analysis – the latter due to the spoken nature of their data.

They identified fifty-one metaphors that received a verbal response beyond continuers. They then categorised the response to these metaphors using the typology shown below in Table 3. Their typology draws on pre-existing frameworks (Cameron, 2008, 2010; Mathieson et al., 2015; van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023) but was inductively developed to better reflect the nuances of their dataset.

Table 3. Declercq and van Poppel (2024) coding scheme (p. 172-173)⁴

Category	Definition	Source/inductive development or adaptations during coding
Explicit agreement/praise	An interlocutor explicitly agrees with or praises the metaphor used by another interlocutor.	Mathieson et al., (2015).
Repetition	The metaphor is repeated identically, as used in a previous turn.	Cameron (2008, 2010); Mathieson et al., (2015). These authors include repetition with similar words; Declercq and van Poppel (2024) follow Cameron (2009) here and only include identical repetitions.

⁴Wording from the original table has been retained, with minor grammatical adjustments for clarity (e.g., replacing “our coding effort” with “the authors’ coding effort”).

Relexicalization	The same metaphor is expressed with a similar/related word or phrase.	Based on Cameron (2008, 2010). Similar to Mathieson et al.'s (2015) category <i>rephrasing</i> .
Metaphorical elaboration	The same metaphor is used, but additional ramifications and dimensions are explored by extending or modifying it. The linguistic expression can be the same, or related/similar.	Based on Cameron's (2008, 2010) <i>explication</i> and Mathieson et al.'s (2015) <i>elaboration</i> . Declercq and van Poppel (2024) made it more specific during their coding effort to distinguish between metaphorical and literal elaboration (see next row).
Literal elaboration	Teasing out additional ramifications through literal language regarding the target domain.	New, more specific category developed during the author's coding effort, but similar to Mathieson et al.'s (2015) <i>elaboration</i> and <i>clarification</i> .
Literal paraphrase	The proposition of the metaphor is explained or repeated in literal language.	New category developed during the authors' coding effort, with some resemblance to Mathieson et al.'s (2015) <i>clarification</i> .
Reframing	Other source domain, same target domain.	From framework already previously developed by author.
Contrast	A contrasting term is used.	Cameron (2008, 2010).
Recontextualisation	Same source domain, other target domain.	Semino et al., (2013); van Poppel and Pilgram (2023).
Propositional resistance	Metaphorical expression is called out based on the fact that the domain is not represented correctly, or that there are not	van Poppel and Pilgram (2023).

	relevant similarities between domains.	
Locutional resistance	Metaphors expression is called out based on the fact that the move is not understandable e.g., unclear what mappings should be made between domains.	van Poppel and Pilgram (2023).
Personal resistance	Metaphorical expression is called out based on the fact that the person carrying out the move is not in the right position to do so.	van Poppel and Pilgram (2023).
Situational resistance	Metaphorical expression is called out because it is not appropriate in context, and/or has negative consequences.	van Poppel and Pilgram (2023)
Question-answer frame reuse	Frame from a metaphor used in a question reused in answer.	New category developed during the author’s coding effort.

The authors found that the most frequent form of metaphor uptake was repetition, more critical forms of uptake were also observed, including reframing, and both propositional and locutional resistance. The categories of contrast, personal resistance, and situational resistance were not observed in their dataset.

2.7. Metaphor and Trans Lived Experiences

The previous sections have outlined existing approaches to metaphor, metaphorical creativity and metaphor evaluation. This section will focus on the limited research on metaphor in relation to trans lived experiences. While there is a small body of literature examining metaphor in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual identities, with a particular focus on metaphors for ‘coming out’ (e.g., Zimman, 2009; Scott, 2018; Chirrey, 2020), there remains very limited research on the metaphors used by trans people. To my knowledge, only two previous studies have considered how transgender people use metaphor when talking about their lived experiences (Lederer, 2015,

2019). These focus specifically on the experience of transitioning. There has been no previous study considering how gender dysphoria is conceptualised metaphorically.

Lederer (2015) analysed a corpus of transgender ‘coming-out’ stories and an archive of transition narratives to explore the metaphorical models transgender people use to conceptualise gender transition. The transition-specific corpus was compiled from 200 consecutive postings from a thread posted on the Experience Project website entitled, “I am Transgender (Personal stories, advice, and support) (henceforth, IAT)” and comprises 73,839 words. The archive of narrative data consists of multiple online sources, including “30 self-published coming-out stories on YouTube, 10 television interviews from broadcast networks such as ABC and CNN, five published autobiographical works, multiple internet forum postings, and message board commentary” (p. 99).

Lederer (2015) analysed the data using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Firstly, a frequency list of the 500 most frequent words in the IAT corpus (excluding function words) was produced to give an insight into the common themes in the corpus. A decision was made to generate a frequency list rather than perform a search for the lexeme “transition” as gender transition is understood as a process rather than an abstract entity. Thus, a lexeme specific search would not yield the source domains used to conceptualise transition. From the frequency list, several semantic constellations emerged, including family, gender, physical appearance, cognition, time, and relationships, indicating that when talking about transition, trans people focus on physical change and the effect of this upon friends and family members. Lederer (2015) notes that these lexical groupings do not necessarily reveal metaphorical patterns within the data. Therefore, the narrative archive was manually searched for figurative language. Two dominant metaphorical models for gender transition emerged from the data: transition as a journey through space and the self divided.

The use of the JOURNEY source domain is not surprising given that change in general is understood as motion through space (Lederer, 2015). Within the JOURNEY frame the trans person is a traveller, the origin of the journey corresponds to their sex assigned at birth, the destination of the journey corresponds to their true gender identity, the path they travel along corresponds to the transition process, and intermediate locations on the journey correspond to transition

milestones. Lederer (2015) notes that the JOURNEY source domain is elaborated in various ways to reflect an individual's personal experience of transition. For example, one speaker compares their transition to slowly wading into a cold lake, whereby the individual decides if they want to stay where they are, head back toward land, or go deeper into the lake:

I take a step or two, shiver a bit at the coldness, and hang out for a bit as my body acclimates. Then I decide if I want to go deeper. All along the transition I have been open to the concept that I can stay where I am, go back, or push deeper. And though several times I have pulled back—too deep, too fast, too cold—I have always found myself moving toward transition (Lederer, 2015, p. 105).

On the other hand, another speaker compares their transition to being on a train that they cannot leave:

This . . . moving forward with transition is 100% autopilot. I couldn't stop it if I wanted to . . . I'm on a train heading down a path I'm not sure I should be on and no way to get off the train. I feel a massive compelling to continue on the train, but afraid that I should try to get off the tracks (Lederer, 2015, p. 105).

Lederer (2015) notes that these two examples have seemingly conflicting inferences. Firstly, the examples differ in terms of agency, the first speaker is in control, making considered choices about her transition. Conversely, the second speaker's desire to transition is so intense that she does not have agency over this process. From her perspective, transition "seems to be all or nothing—on the train or off" (Lederer, 2015: p. 106). Lederer (2015) suggests that these examples illustrate a conceptual paradox that is arguably inherent in the transition process, namely the revelation that one can change gender is both freeing and scary. In addition, the desire to transition is often presented as urgent, however, in reality, physical transition is often a lengthy and belaboured process – involving waiting lists for hormone therapies and surgeries and time for the body to heal. Thus, the two types of journeys presented above, one slow and considered, the other rushed and urgent, are able to capture the conflicts one may experience during transition whereby "urgency coexists with extreme consequence" (Lederer, 2015, p. 114). A particular path may be the most desirable, yet it may still be approached with extreme caution

(Lederer, 2015). Lederer (2015) notes that to outsiders (presumably cis people), urgency and deliberation are incompatible inferentially, it is typically thought that if a change is imperative, it should be made immediately. This could be a potential reason why the transition process is misunderstood.

In addition, Lederer (2015) suggests that this metaphor could potentially promote a binary understanding of gender within which male and female are considered bounded categories or regions in space through which a trans person must undertake a journey from one journey category to another.

The second most frequent metaphorical model found within the data is the DIVIDED SELF. Within this metaphor, the body pre-transition is considered a container for the internal self, whereas post-transition, the body is viewed as a container which hides one's original sex assignment and gender history. A transition is considered 'complete' when the body exterior matches one's gender identity. Lederer (2015) notes that this metaphor is realised through common metaphorical linguistic expressions such as "trapped in the wrong body" and "coming out" (p. 108), both of which are frequent in the IAT corpus and narrative data.

More generally, SPLIT SELF metaphors are widespread; they are used to conceptualise tensions between different aspects of the self. Using the terminology of A. Lakoff and Becker (1991), Lakoff (1992, 1996) claimed that every person is comprised of a 'subject' (the locus of subjectivity and consciousness) and a 'self' (one's body and physical characteristics). Within this framing, the inner self is often positioned as the true or authentic self, whilst the body (our outer self) is the mere container for this (Lakoff, 1996). This notion is reflected in Lederer's (2015) findings, though SPLIT SELF metaphors take on additional layers of meaning in relation to trans identities.

The type of SPLIT SELF metaphor identified in Lederer's (2015) data is the mind-body split⁵. Lederer (2015) proposes that trans people may use body-mind split metaphors when they feel as though their "'real' inner self" does not align with their "exterior" gender presentation (p. 107).

⁵ Other types of SPLIT SELF metaphor include body-body splits, mind-mind splits, splits based on different social roles ("social self splits"), alternative selves ("real imaginary self splits"), and differences in temporality ("time1-time2 splits") (Emmott, 2002, p. 174).

Such metaphors frame transitioning as a process of aligning these two selves through altering the body's exterior so that it better aligns with one's internal gender identity (Lederer, 2015).

Lederer (2015) suggests that the DIVIDED SELF metaphor interacts with the KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor as pre-transition it is the true inner self that is hidden from public view, however, post-transition one's previous gender identity is hidden.

Lederer (2015) notes that both the JOURNEY and DIVIDED SELF metaphorical models can be activated simultaneously such that transition is understood as “a movement to match internal and external self” (p. 115).

This research is important as it is the first systematic investigation of trans lived experiences via metaphor; however, it should be acknowledged that it does have some problematic aspects, potentially related to understandings of trans identities at the time of publication. Firstly, the definition of trans provided in the article is exclusionary, a trans person is defined as someone “who has begun or completed a change in their sex characteristics from male to female or female to male”. (Lederer, 2015, p. 99). This is reductive as it does not include those who identify as trans without feeling the need to transition physically. It also excludes those who identify as nonbinary. The article defines transition in terms of “physical changes” made to the body (p. 96), however many trans people transition in other ways, such as transitioning socially. This view is also evident in the explanations of the metaphors' entailments – there is arguably a limited view of pre- and post-transition. In addition, outdated, medicalist language is used within the article. The decision was made not to reproduce these terms here. However, it is important to acknowledge that language around gender diversity is continually shifting and developing.

Co-Speech Gesture and Metaphors for Transition

In a later study, Lederer (2019) examined how gender transition is metaphorically conceptualised through co-speech gesture. Co-speech gesture is considered “a window onto thinking” (McNeill & Duncan, 2000, p. 143). Gestures are multifunctional; they can accompany and supplement linguistic metaphor by elaborating a source domain, they can ‘activate’ a metaphor absent from linguistic reference, and they can uncover inferential patterns which are not necessarily discernible through linguistic metaphor (Cienki & Müller, 2008 in Lederer, 2019, p. 34).

Lederer (2019) analysed a video corpus of self-published ‘coming out’ narratives sourced from publicly accessible video sharing platforms such as YouTube in which English-speaking trans people described their transition process. Lederer (2019) analysed a total of forty gestural sequences along with accompanying discourse, focusing particularly on how gesture is used to reinforce, reveal, and elaborate existing metaphors for transition. The existing metaphors to which Lederer (2019) refers are the metaphors identified in Lederer (2015), namely (i) transition as a journey; (ii) the self divided (a mismatch between one’s exterior appearance and interior gender identity); with the addition of (iii) decision-making is weighing, used to address the lengthy decision-making process involved in gender transition (Lederer, 2019, p. 36).

Firstly, gesture was shown to reinforce a spatially based understanding of gender as inward-facing palms were used to delineate discrete category boundaries between male and female, as illustrated below in Figure 1.

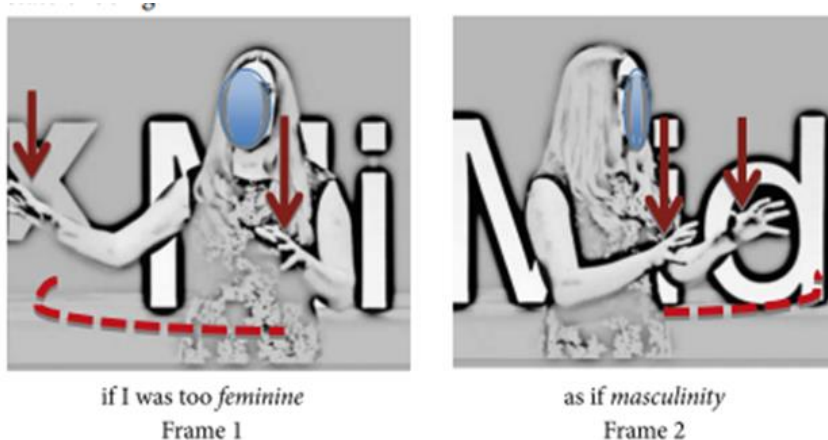


Figure 1. Inward-facing palms delineating two categories or regions (reproduced from Lederer, 2019, p. 37)

Lederer (2019) notes that this co-speech gesture is particularly interesting, as an individual may contest the rigidity of the gender binary in their speech, whilst reinforcing it gesturally – a phenomenon termed “a conceptual clash” (Lederer, 2019, p. 50).

In addition, translational hand gestures were used to present transition as a journey by showing motion across metaphorical ‘gender regions’ (shown below in Figure 2).



Figure 2. Translational hand gesture (reproduced from Lederer, 2019, p. 41)

Gesture further served as a visual reinforcement when speakers talked about their divided identities - divided in terms of gender assignment, affiliation and time. For example, speakers frequently referred to a past and present self when discussing their transition, visually instantiating the SPLIT SELF metaphor, as shown in Figure 3 below.



Figure 3. Weighing gesture reinforcing the idea of a divided identity (reproduced from Lederer, 2019, p. 43)

Finally, gestures were used to contest gendered labels through the use of co-speech scare quotes (as shown below in Figure 4). Although scare quotes did not evoke or reinforce a particular conceptual metaphor, they signal a disassociation or disaffiliation from a past gender identity or label (Lederer, 2019).

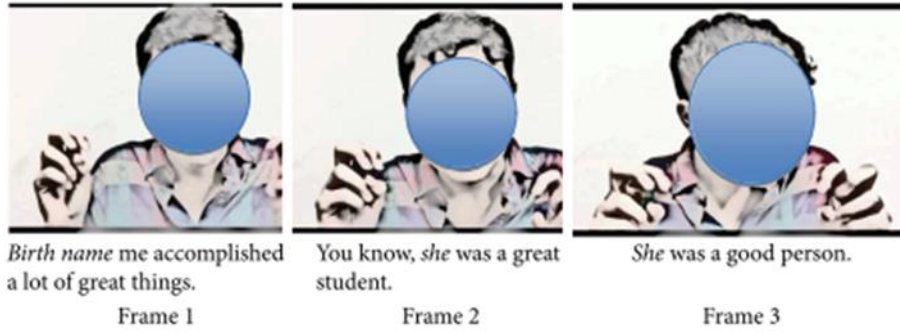


Figure 4. The use of co-speech scare quotes to contest dispreferred names and pronouns (reproduced from Lederer, 2019, p. 48)

Overall, these findings reinforce the metaphors found in Lederer (2015), namely (i) transition as a journey and (ii) the self divided (a mismatch between one's exterior appearance and interior gender identity) alongside (iii) decision-making is weighing. This demonstrates how gesture can be used to depict a binary understanding of gender, present gender transition as a journey, highlight divided identities, and resist imposed gender categories.

2.8. This Thesis in the Context of Previous Literature

To summarise, the present study is situated within both cognitive and discourse-based approaches to metaphor. From a conceptual perspective, I adopt the notion that metaphors can offer valuable insight into subjective experience, and that they have framing effects. Metaphors highlight certain aspects of experience while hiding others, thereby shaping how experiences are communicated, perceived, and potentially conceptualised. From a discourse-based perspective, I recognise that metaphors are themselves shaped by a range of intersecting contextual factors. In the present research, these include the affordances of the Reddit platform, the communicative norms of relevant subreddits, the influence of previous posts, and the contributor's relationship with their body at the moment of writing. Throughout my analysis, I draw on El Refaie's (2014, 2019) notion of dynamic embodiment together with the concepts of dys-appearance (Leder, 1990) and eu-appearance (Zeiler, 2010), extending them to account for metaphors of gender dysphoria.

With regard to metaphorical creativity, the majority of metaphors identified in the dataset are novel. This likely reflects both the sensitive and potentially distressing nature of the gender dysphoric experience and the tendency for creative metaphors to be used when talking about

emotionally charged, negatively evaluated experiences (e.g., Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Littlemore, Turner & Tuck, 2023).

I also situate my findings in relation to Lederer's (2015, 2019) work on metaphor and trans lived experiences, extending this emerging area of research by providing a systematic account of metaphor use in naturally occurring online discourse about gender dysphoria.

Finally, by examining not only the metaphorical source domains proposed, but also how they are endorsed, resisted and negotiated, this thesis contributes to the emerging scholarship on metaphor evaluation. It provides new insight into the criteria individuals use to evaluate metaphors as successful or unsuccessful.

Chapter 3: Data and Methodology

In this chapter, I provide a detailed account of the data source analysed in this study and discuss the methodological decisions I made whilst conducting this research. I make use of the first-person, as I adopt a reflexive methodological approach and feel it is important to explain how I made decisions and accounted for any ethical dilemmas that arose.

The first half of this chapter introduces the dataset (Section 3.1) before providing a brief overview of Reddit, the platform from which the metaphors were collected (Section 3.2). I then discuss the ethical issues I considered when working with sensitive data sourced from vulnerable⁶ online communities (Section 3.3). The second half of this chapter focuses on the methods of data collection and analysis. I describe the procedures used to collect (Section 3.4), identify (Section 3.5) and categorise (Section 3.6) metaphors relevant to the experience of gender dysphoria. Finally, I will describe how comments expressing an evaluation of metaphor(s) were identified and coded (Section 3.8).

3.1. Data Source

This research investigates how trans people talk about their lived experiences of gender dysphoria in transgender communities on Reddit. This study analyses the metaphors found in twenty threads taken from the ten most popular (in terms of members) and relevant (i.e., advice-based) transgender communities on Reddit⁷. I use the term ‘advice-based’ to refer to communities which contain serious discussions of the experience of gender dysphoria. Threads included in this analysis were selected on the basis that they all involve explicit discussions about metaphors for how gender dysphoria feels. More specifically, they involve the original poster (the person who begins the thread) proposing a metaphor for gender dysphoria and asking contributors to evaluate it (n=11) or explicitly asking contributors to share their own metaphors for gender dysphoria (n=9). Oftentimes, the original poster explicitly says that they want to develop a metaphor which explains the experience to cis family members, partners, and/or friends. The existence and popularity of these threads demonstrate a recognition of the

⁶ I use vulnerable here to mean individuals who may be disempowered as a result of their minority status (Page et al., 2022, p. 72).

⁷ The analysed communities were the most popular at the time of data collection, this may since have changed.

importance of metaphor in communicating about difficult and personal lived experiences, including gender dysphoria.

As explained in more detail below, the following search terms were used to identify threads discussing metaphors for gender dysphoria: *metaphor*, *metaphors*, *simile*, *similes*, *analogy*, and *analogies*. All of the analysed threads have one of the search terms in their title. As the threads involve explicit discussions of metaphoricity, they will be referred to as ‘metalinguistic’ throughout this thesis. The threads include contributions from individuals sharing their own metaphors, elaborating on others’ metaphors, evaluating metaphors, or giving advice. The total number of comments on the threads ranges from five to eighty-three.

The threads were qualitatively analysed to identify the linguistic metaphors Redditors use to express how gender dysphoria feels. Metaphor “involves talking and, potentially, thinking about one thing in terms of another, where the two things are different, but some form of similarity can be perceived between them” (Semino et al., 2018, p. 5). In practice, this perceived similarity can be loose, subjective, controversial, and/or only understood by the producer of the metaphor. For this reason, in addition to considering the range of source domains used to conceptualise gender dysphoria, this thesis also investigates how Redditors evaluate the metaphors including the reasons given for their endorsement and/or resistance.

Before discussing data analysis methods, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the Reddit platform infrastructure, including its main features, design, and affordances.

3.2. What is Reddit?

Reddit, the self-proclaimed ‘front page of the internet’, is a social networking and content aggregation platform with 70 million daily active users and approximately 850 million monthly users as of 2024 (Curry, 2024). Registered Reddit users can post content, ask questions, and engage in discussions. The main purpose of Reddit is to facilitate discussions on almost any topic via its subreddit structure (Adams, 2024). Content on Reddit is publicly accessible, meaning that anyone can view what is posted on the site without an account, with the exception of private subreddits (Proferes et al., 2021; Fiesler et al., 2024). In addition, participation history is also

public, thus, anyone can view a poster's public comments and posts by clicking on their username (Proferes et al., 2021).

To become a Reddit member (also known as a 'Redditor') users simply have to select a unique username and password. No other verification (i.e., email) is required (Proferes et al., 2021). When creating an account, no personal information such as date of birth or gender is required. Site-wide norms encourage the use of pseudonyms, rather than one's real name for reasons of privacy (Proferes et al., 2021). Reddit user profiles do not include names, ages, countries, or friend lists (Gliniecka, 2023).

Reddit promotes a culture of anonymity in its terms and conditions (Gliniecka, 2023). More specifically, "Reddit privacy and terms of service documents explicitly remind the users about the platform's public and anonymous nature, the accountability for the content they post, and the third-party access to data" (Gliniecka, 2023, p. 6). Reddit's privacy policy states that site data "is public and accessible to everyone, even without an account" and reminds users that "by using the Services, you are directing us to share this information publicly and freely" (Reddit, 2024). The policy also states that Reddit allows third parties to access public Reddit content via the Reddit API and other similar technologies (Reddit, 2024). Thus, before registering to the site, users are made aware that their data is publicly accessible. It should be noted that in comparison to other platforms, Reddit's privacy and conditions documents are very short yet comprehensive, and they are easy to read upon sign-up (Gliniecka, 2023).

The ease with which a Reddit account can be created means that it is not uncommon for users to register multiple accounts or have one-time use accounts, particularly if they wish to engage in discussions about a sensitive topic (Ammari et al., 2019; Leavitt, 2015; Anderson, 2015; Proferes et al., 2021). The large degree of anonymity offered by Reddit means that users often feel comfortable to speak freely, but it also means that demographic information can be difficult to obtain which can be a limitation when using Reddit for research purposes (Proferes et al., 2021). As previously mentioned, Reddit is organised by communities dedicated to a particular topic or subject known as 'subreddits'. Subreddits are communities in which registered users can post content and comment on other users' content (Ceci, 2024). Example subreddits include r/gaming, r/Music, and r/worldnews. There are over 2.2 million Subreddits, 130,000 of which are estimated

to be active (Curry, 2024). Registered users (Redditors) can follow subreddits, but not other Redditors (Medvedev et al., 2019). Thus, unlike other social networking sites which organize content around the profiles that a user follows, Reddit is organised around user-created communities (Fiesler et al., 2024). Subreddits are user-moderated by volunteers, and each subreddit can create its own rules (Proferes et al., 2021; Fiesler et al., 2024). For example, subreddits may outline specific community guidelines that members must follow, for example, they may require posts to be written in a particular format or they may not consent to their data being used for research purposes. Moderators are able to delete content and ban Redditors who break subreddit rules, whilst subreddit members can flag content that they feel requires moderator intervention.

If Redditors choose to post, they must post within a Subreddit. Redditors typically post their opinions, propose discussion points, ask for information, or share their personal experiences relating to the designated subreddit topic (Adams, 2024). Redditors can comment on other users' posts or reply to their comments, leading to the creation of a comment chain. Discussions appear in a threaded format and threads are typically comprised of a title, an original post, subsequent posts, and comments. Each individual post includes information such as the author's username, the date and time of submission, and whether the submission has been edited. In this thesis, 'post' will be used to refer to a single submission, 'comment' will refer to replies to a post, and 'thread' will refer to the entire discussion chain comprising of an initial post and its comments. 'OP' (original poster) is used to refer to the author of the initial post. If users would like to post, vote, or comment on Reddit they must register for an account (Amaya et al., 2021). An anonymised image of the thread structure is presented below in Figure 5.



Figure 5. An illustration of the discussion thread structure of Reddit

In addition to leaving comments, Redditors can react to content by leaving an upvote or a downvote (equivalent to a like or dislike). When a Redditor's content receives upvotes they earn "karma points", but if they receive downvotes they lose karma points, encouraging Redditors to post good content and make useful comments (Anderson, 2015). Users are also able to quote and respond to content; the quoted content is indented to demarcate it from the user's own response.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

This section will provide an overview of the various ethical considerations that arose when conducting this research. Although Reddit is more public and anonymous than other platforms, as registration is not required to view content posted on the site and site-wide norms encourage the use of pseudonyms (Gliniecka, 2023), it is still important to take into account how this research could affect contributors. Before data collection took place, ethical approval for this study was obtained from Lancaster University's FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee. Stommel and Rijk (2021) argue that when collecting data from online discussion sites, such as Reddit, researchers must take a number of ethical considerations into account including: (i) the public/private distinction, (ii) anonymity, (iii) searchability/retrievability, (iv) informed consent, (v) sensitivity of data, and (vi) vulnerable groups (p. 276). These factors are often mentioned in the literature relating to the ethics of working with online social media data, analysing sensitive data, and researching the experiences of vulnerable communities (e.g., Ferris & Sass-Kortsak, 2011; Spilioti & Tagg, 2017; Smedley & Coulson, 2021; Fiesler et al., 2024). Therefore, in this section I explore each factor in turn to provide a transparent and comprehensive account of the ethical considerations I made when designing and conducting this study.

It should be noted that at the time of writing, there is no single, international set of ethical regulations for conducting social media research (Page et al., 2022). Therefore, decisions have been informed by guidelines for good practice and previous studies.

3.3.1. Public/Private Distinction

Firstly, researchers must be mindful of the distinction between what is public and what is private. Elm (2009) differentiates between four levels of access in online settings: *public environments* which are accessible to anyone with an internet connection, *semi-public environments* which are publicly accessible but require site-registration, *semi-private environments* which are restricted to specific groups, such as company intranets, and *private environments* which can only be accessed by the creator of the content. Reddit can be categorised as a public environment as its content is in the public domain and a sign-in is not required to view content posted on the site. At the time of data collection, the use of data by third parties was explicitly mentioned in Reddit's terms and conditions. However, it is important to recognise that Redditors may not be fully

aware of the reach of their posts or how they could potentially be used in a research context. Therefore, it is important for researchers to take reasonable measures to protect the privacy of Reddit users.

Although pseudonyms are widely used and encouraged on Reddit, in this study, usernames have been removed. In cases where personally identifying information is included in a post, such as names, ages, or geographical locations, these have been changed.

The subreddits included in this study are public and do not require approval from a moderator to join. In addition, they do not prohibit the use of their content for research purposes in their community guidelines. Nevertheless, the subreddits from which the analysed posts were sourced will not be named to further protect user privacy.

3.3.2. Anonymity, Searchability and/or Retrievability

Quoting has been described as a ‘threat to anonymity’ (Smedley & Coulson, 2021; Stommel & Rijk, 2021), as complete anonymity is difficult to achieve in projects which make use of verbatim quotations. However, the use of verbatim quotations is standard practice in discourse analytic research where language itself is the object of study (Herring, 1996; Stommel & Rijk, 2021). In fact, in linguistics it is considered good practice to provide verbatim quotations as evidence (Page et al., 2022).

This study involves an in-depth investigation of metaphorical language use; therefore, it was not possible to avoid the use of direct quotations. In addition, the authentic representation of lived experiences is a priority within this research; thus, I made the decision to exactly reproduce the language of Reddit users, including any spelling mistakes, typos, and formatting inconsistencies. This does, however, present the risk that the original post could be found using a search engine. However, in the case that a post is identified, all that would be found is a user’s publicly available content and pseudonym, not their ‘real name’ (Reagle, 2022, p. 7). In addition, in April 2022 “Reddit announced they had extended their search facility to comments and made their searches less literal” (Reagle, 2022, p. 9). This means that a query does not have to completely match the text of a post to return relevant results (Staff, 2022 in Reagle 2022, p. 9). This change

will make it easier to locate sources without their exact wording (Reagle, 2022). Therefore, even if quotations were paraphrased or rephrased, there is still the risk that the original comment or post could be found.

3.3.3. Informed Consent

I made the decision not to ask for informed consent from the Redditors whose quotations were used in this research for multiple reasons. Firstly, upon sign up, Redditors are made aware that their data may be used by third parties in the terms and conditions which are concise and easy to read. In addition, while some subreddits specifically advise against their members' data being used for research purposes, this was not the case for any of the subreddits analysed in this research. In addition, for reasons of practicality (e.g., time constraints) it would not be possible to ask for informed consent from every single Redditor whose data is analysed. I collected and analysed twenty threads from ten different subreddits, some of which have up to 83 comments. Therefore, it would not be feasible to contact every single Redditor to ask for their consent. In addition, some Redditors may no longer use the site, therefore it would be unlikely that my request would receive a response.

Furthermore, the Reddit platform promotes anonymity and encourages the use of pseudonyms, meaning that even if a post was found, it is highly unlikely that the individual behind the posts could be identified as Reddit user profiles do not include names, ages, countries, or friend lists (Gliniecka, 2023, p. 6). I am aware that I am collecting sensitive data and if the identity of a participant⁸ got revealed there is a risk of disclosing their trans identity. However, there is minimal, if any, risk of revealing a Reddit user's offline identity.

Moreover, this study focuses on naturally occurring discussions of metaphoricity and consent requests may cause Redditors to alter their behaviour. Although the data was pre-existing, I thought that consent requests could impact members' future use of the subreddit, and in some cases, may even cause them to leave the subreddit, potentially preventing them from accessing an invaluable support network. Online trans communities are particularly valuable for

⁸ Here I use the term participant loosely, as I did not seek informed consent from the Redditors whose data are analysed in this study.

individuals who may not receive support in their offline life or do not feel safe being ‘out’ in the real world (Selkie et al., 2020). Research shows that these spaces function as safe environments where users can share experiences, build relationships, explore their identity without offline commitment, reduce prejudice, and access help (Cipolletta, Votadora & Faccio, 2017; Selkie et al., 2020).

Robinson (2001 as cited in Smedley & Coulson, 2021) notes that “[r]esearchers have a responsibility to avoid harming both individual members and the forum. When collecting data from public forums researchers may need to consider waiving the need for informed consent if the risks involved with obtaining consent are greater than the protection it offers” (p. 94). Similarly, Page et al., (2022) state that, when the subject matter being discussed is of a sensitive nature, it may not be necessary to obtain informed consent as the knowledge of the presence of a researcher could cause distress/harm to participants. For the reasons outlined above, I decided to waive the need for informed consent on the condition that I put other protective strategies in place, such as not specifying the subreddits I collected data from, not providing usernames when quoting data, and removing or editing any personally identifying information found in quotations. As a result of these measures, it is highly unlikely that this research will cause harm at an individual or community level.

3.3.4. Sensitivity of Data and Research Involving Vulnerable Groups

This research explores how lived experiences of gender dysphoria are spoken about metaphorically. As the data analysed discusses the topic of gender identity, it is sensitive (Page et al., 2022). The metaphors analysed in this study are sourced from online transgender communities. Therefore, there is a potential risk that if a poster’s offline identity was uncovered, this could in turn disclose their trans identity. However, as discussed above, through the various protective measures put in place, this risk is minimal.

3.3.5. Impact and Outreach

It is important to keep in mind the primary purpose of the posts – users are trying to collaboratively develop metaphors that accurately describe the experience of gender dysphoria to help explain it to cisgender family members, partners, and friends. Therefore, the metaphors

analysed in this study are posted with the intent of educating others and increasing awareness of trans lived experiences. The parameters of private versus public are often used as benchmarks to determine whether data can, or indeed, should be used for research purposes. However, it is important to consider that not all users desire privacy when posting online. In fact, many users post with the intention of reaching a wide audience and this appears to be the case with the current dataset.

Whilst the threads have the aim of increasing understandings of gender dysphoria through metaphor, this research similarly has the aim of gaining a better understanding of gender dysphoria. In order to maximise the accessibility of my findings, following the publication of this thesis I intend to create a 'Metaphor Menu' for the experience of gender dysphoria - a resource providing multiple metaphors for gender dysphoria, to present people with a range of different experiences, potentially allowing them to find a metaphor that resonates with them personally. This resource will be invaluable in educational and healthcare contexts. Ferris and Sass-Kortsak (2011) suggest that sharing research findings with the participants and/or the communities under study can help to achieve the ethical principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, and beneficence. The Metaphor Menu is intended to benefit the trans community.

The concept of a 'Metaphor Menu' was developed by a team of researchers at Lancaster University who created a Metaphor Menu for People Living with Cancer (Semino et al., 2018). The menu is a collection of metaphors for describing cancer, inspired by people who have personally experienced it. The resource is intended for use by patients, family members, and healthcare professionals. A Metaphor Menu is a resource intended to facilitate communication around sensitive topics. It is not prescriptive and does not intend to impose particular metaphors upon its readership. It simply helps readers to find a metaphor that works for them.

3.3.6. Positionality

It is important to consider my positionality as a researcher when conducting research on sensitive topics and working with data sourced from vulnerable populations. I am cisgender, and I am not a member of the trans community. Therefore, I am aware that I cannot fully understand or personally relate to the lived experiences I analyse. I strive to make sense of the users' subjective

lived experiences as accurately as possible by not abstracting from their language use and ensuring to consult works by trans authors. However, when analysing data from a population to which one does not belong, there is potential for misrepresentations (Andalibi et al., 2018). I make use of my linguistic expertise to offer insights into lived experiences of gender dysphoria via metaphor. I adopt a sensitive and descriptive approach towards linguistic analysis which means that I do not make value judgements of the metaphors. I simply describe the metaphors in terms of established frameworks and consider their framing implications.

3.4. Data Collection

This section will explain how the data was collected from Reddit using the Reddit API (Application Program Interface) and PRAW (Python Reddit API Wrapper) (Boe, 2020).

3.4.1. Subreddit Selection

I manually identified the ten most popular (in terms of members at the time of data collection) and relevant (i.e., advice-based) trans subreddits. In order to do this, I opened Reddit and searched using the search term ‘transgender’, filtered the results by ‘community’, and compiled a list of the results. I then repeated this process using the search term ‘trans’. I manually reviewed the results of both searches to identify the most popular advice-based, transgender subreddits. This involved viewing each subreddit and reading their community descriptions, pinned posts, and a sample of recent threads (approximately 10 posts per subreddit) to assess each subreddit’s dominant type of content. Subreddits were classified as advice-based if the majority of sampled posts involved users seeking advice or support (e.g., asking questions about gender identity, transitioning, or experiences of dysphoria) and receiving responses intended to assist or guide. I focused on advice-based subreddits because they were more likely to contain detailed, personal discussions of gender dysphoria, which was central to the aims of the study.

When reviewing the subreddits, I applied the following exclusion criteria:

- Image-based subreddits were excluded as this study explores the linguistic metaphors used to describe gender dysphoria, though visual metaphors would be an interesting area for future research;

- News-based subreddits were excluded as this study investigates personal lived accounts of gender dysphoria;
- Activity-based subreddits were excluded (e.g., trans gaming subreddits) as these were not focused on lived experiences.

3.4.2. Post Selection

After identifying the ten most popular relevant trans subreddits, I then identified metalinguistic threads within them. I use the term ‘metalinguistic threads’ to refer to threads in which the original poster asks for or proposes metaphor(s) for the experience of gender dysphoria. This section will outline the procedure used to identify and collect metalinguistic posts on the topic of gender dysphoria.

3.4.3. Configuration

Firstly, I had to set up the Reddit API (Application Program Interface) and PRAW (Python Reddit API Wrapper) Configuration (Boe, 2020). The Reddit API can be used to collect data from specific subreddits, users, time periods and so on (Amaya et al., 2021). It is able to collect a post along with its associated metadata (e.g., user, subreddit, etc).

I used PRAW to interact with the Reddit API. I configured PRAW with the Reddit API client ID, client secret, and user agent for authentication. The Reddit API is accessible to any registered user, but it does require authentication.

At the time of data collection, it was required by Reddit that an API was used for data collection, even for relatively small datasets such as the one analysed in this study.

3.4.4. Defining Search Criteria

The Reddit API can be used to collect extremely specific data. Therefore, I developed defined search criteria which would enable me to extract metalinguistic posts from the ten selected subreddits. The main criterion was posts which contained a specific search term in their titles, i.e., *metaphor*, *metaphors*, *simile*, *similes*, *analogy*, and *analogies*. I decided to only include posts if at least one of the selected search terms appeared in the title to ensure that it had a focus on

metaphoricity. These search terms were selected on the basis that they are terms a non-linguist may use to talk about figurative language. However, one limitation of this approach is that posts would only be collected using the Reddit API if the search terms had been spelt correctly by the poster, meaning that potentially relevant posts were missed. In addition to this, I also sought posts which met the following inclusion criteria:

- Posts which were published within a three-year date range: from 01/01/2020 to 31/12/2022. This decision was made on the basis that this would yield a significant amount of recent data, but would still allow for an in-depth, qualitative analysis.
- Posts which had five or more comments. This decision was made to allow me to consider the evaluations that the metaphors received.

3.4.5. Automated Data Extraction

The automated data extraction iterated through each subreddit and search term combination (*metaphor, metaphors, simile, similes, analogy, analogies*). Within each combination, the ‘search’ function of PRAW retrieved posts, filtering them using the ‘time_filter’ parameter. For each post retrieved, it checked if it met the following conditions:

- A search term (*metaphor, metaphors, simile, similes, analogy, analogies*) was present in the title of the post.
- The post’s creation date was within the predefined range (01/01/2020-31/12/2022).
- The post had received five or more comments.

3.4.6. Structuring and Saving the Data

For posts meeting the defined criteria, the data was structured to capture:

- Title
- Description (text of the post)
- Date of creation
- Number of comments
- URL
- Number of upvotes
- Author’s username
- Subreddit name

These details were stored in a list. The structured list of posts was exported to a CSV file, ensuring UTF-8 encoding to handle any special characters or non-English content. This CSV file (shown below in an anonymised format) served as the primary dataset for further analysis.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Title	Description	Date	Number_of_Url	Upvotes	Author	Subreddit	
2			24/02/2022 19:22	27	https://www	288		
3			25/08/2021 07:53	8	https://www	2		
4			25/08/2021 07:53	8	https://www	2		
5			21/04/2021 15:02	33	https://www	850		
6			08/04/2021 18:22	10	https://www	60		
7			03/01/2022 13:36	5	https://www	2		
8			02/06/2022 14:47	5	https://www	3		
9			01/02/2021 20:24	19	https://www	105		
10			20/09/2021 17:52	13	https://www	3		
11			04/02/2020 05:46	6	https://www	7		
12			19/05/2021 22:22	9	https://www	11		
13			05/01/2021 00:09	8	https://www	6		
14			01/02/2021 20:24	19	https://www	108		
15			20/09/2021 17:52	13	https://www	1		
16			05/01/2021 00:09	8	https://www	7		
17			10/04/2022 00:25	23	https://www	3		
18			10/02/2022 15:22	24	https://www	17		
19			27/05/2021 02:42	15	https://www	0		
20			21/01/2021 19:08	11	https://www	6		
21			23/06/2021 05:34	43	https://www	603		
22			18/03/2022 11:43	8	https://www	13		
23			17/11/2020 17:26	10	https://www	6		
24			09/09/2021 17:49	173	https://www	1540		
25			07/08/2020 14:25	62	https://www	965		
26			14/10/2021 21:46	18	https://www	204		
27			24/10/2020 07:20	14	https://www	21		
28			25/02/2022 04:52	14	https://www	195		
29			28/08/2020 15:01	5	https://www	21		
30			14/05/2021 13:38	5	https://www	26		
31			03/11/2021 19:09	22	https://www	17		
32			24/01/2021 23:47	12	https://www	17		
33			25/05/2022 10:42	85	https://www	287		
34			09/08/2020 03:43	5	https://www	31		
35			11/11/2021 02:19	7	https://www	2		
36			05/02/2020 00:27	6	https://fi.redc	193		
37			25/01/2021 12:07	11	https://www	67		
38			29/01/2021 04:42	8	https://www	133		
39			19/08/2020 16:01	83	https://www	376		
40			27/05/2022 14:14	16	https://www	24		
41			06/08/2020 15:31	10	https://www	344		
42			18/08/2021 23:55	11	https://www	21		
43			14/04/2021 20:18	28	https://www	76		
44			19/03/2022 21:59	23	https://www	155		

Figure 6. CSV file of posts collected using the Python script

3.4.7. Manual Data Cleaning

Data collection took place in October 2023. The script returned a total of forty-three threads, with a total of 943 comments across all threads using the predefined search criteria. However, not all of the returned results were relevant to this study’s research questions. Therefore, a further round of manual review was necessary. I opened the CSV file of results in Excel and

reviewed each thread to determine if it involved discussion of metaphors for the experience of gender dysphoria. To do this, I used the thread's URL to view each thread in context. Comments were sorted by 'old' to ensure that they were presented in chronological order. As the threads contained one of the search terms in the title (*metaphor, metaphors, simile, similes, analogy, analogies*) I could be sure that they would involve at least some discussion of figurative language. However, it was still necessary to manually review each thread to determine if the discussion was focused on the topic of gender dysphoria, as some threads involved discussion of metaphors for other topics, such as deadnaming (calling someone by the name given at birth). In addition, four threads were collected twice by the API, therefore duplicate threads were removed from the spreadsheet.

Whilst manually reviewing the threads, I noticed that several threads made reference to popular culture in their title. For example, "Is [intertextual reference] a trans metaphor?", "[intertextual reference] accidental trans metaphor", or "[intertextual reference] is a 'trans metaphor', director says"⁹. References were made to films, books, games and songs. I made the decision to exclude threads such as these which had an intertextual reference in their title as the comments were focused on discussing the reference rather than metaphors for gender dysphoria¹⁰. In addition, I thought that including threads with an intertextual reference in their title may unevenly skew the data, making INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE appear to be an extremely frequent source domain. Therefore, all the threads analysed in this thesis have titles which focus on broader metaphors for the experience of gender dysphoria, such as "Metaphors for what being trans feels like" or "Is this a good analogy for gender dysphoria?"¹¹.

After manually reviewing each result, a total of twenty threads were selected as appropriate for further analysis. The final dataset consisted of:

- twenty initial posts,
- 538 comments,
- and approximately 37,819 words.

⁹ For reasons of user privacy, these post titles have been edited.

¹⁰ It should be noted that if an intertextual reference was used as a source domain in a comment in one of the twenty analysed threads, this was included for data analysis.

¹¹ For reasons of user privacy, these post titles have been ethically fabricated.

The threads received a mean of 26.9 comments. It should be noted that in a Reddit thread there can be multiple posts in addition to the original post. However, when displaying the total comment count, Reddit aggregates both posts and comments, making it appear as if all contributions are comments (an annotated image of the Reddit thread structure is shown above in Figure 5). The most upvoted comment received a score of 502, while the lowest-scoring comment received a score of 0. On Reddit, a score reflects the difference between upvotes and downvotes, meaning a score of 0 suggests either a balance of positive and negative votes or no engagement. Notably, a negative score is possible on Reddit, so the absence of negatively scored comments may indicate that the fora is a relatively supportive environment.

3.5. Data Analysis

Within the twenty threads, I coded each post/comment according to whether it contained (i) one or more metaphor(s) for gender dysphoria, (ii) an evaluation of metaphor¹² (either endorsement or resistance), or (iii) other. The ‘other’ category included a wide variety of responses which were not relevant to the research questions addressed in this study, such as posts providing links to articles, supportive comments (e.g., “I’m so proud of you”), and moderator comments. In addition, some users proposed vivid hypothetical scenarios which used the kind of signalling expressions that are often used to introduce metaphor (e.g., “imagine”). However, these hypothetical scenarios do not involve a cross-domain mapping and therefore they are not formally classified as metaphor. An example includes: “I’ve always liked one that’s like imagine you’re the exact same gender you are now, but your entire life everyone has insisted you’re another gender”. Here, gender is used to talk about gender identity, therefore there is no cross domain mapping.

Posts/comments could receive more than one code if appropriate. An example of comment coding can be found below.

¹² This is an evaluation of someone else’s metaphor, as will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 8.



Figure 7. Example of comment coding

The following section will explain the process of identifying relevant linguistic metaphors in the dataset, determining an appropriate unit of analysis, and categorizing metaphors under source domains and scenarios.

3.5.1. Metaphor Identification and Coding

The threads involve explicit discussions of metaphors for the experience of gender dysphoria. More specifically, original posters either (i) propose a metaphor for gender dysphoria and ask others to evaluate it (e.g., “A metaphor for dysphoria”) or they invite contributors to propose their own metaphor to explain how gender dysphoria feels, oftentimes to a cisgender audience (e.g., “Do you know any metaphors to describe dysphoria to someone who does not understand”). Therefore, the analysed metaphors are naturally prompted by the use of a metalinguistic term in the title of the post.

Due to the asynchronous nature of the threads, contributors had time to carefully craft their responses, and as a result, the metaphors often take the form of lengthy scenarios with participants, actions, goals, etc. (Musolff, 2004, 2006). In addition, the opportunity for contributors to carefully think about their choice of words means that one could expect a higher concentration of creative metaphors (Fuoli, Littlemore & Turner, 2021). The threads have an interpersonal, community-building function, but they also have an additional purpose of communicating a complex experience in accessible terms (typically to educate cis people on what it is like to be trans). This is reflected through the structure of the threads; oftentimes contributors will introduce their metaphor using a simile and make mappings explicit. Due to the nature of the data, I am particularly focused on linguistic metaphors that are offered in response to the prompt. For example, one contributor proposes the below metaphor to describe how gender dysphoria feels to them. The scenario is introduced using the metaphor flag “like” and the mappings are made explicit (bold):

I like to think of it like a pebble in your shoe. Sometimes that pebble is barely noticeable, and you can walk just fine. Others it's big enough to effect you with every step. Sometimes it's big enough that you can't even stand up, much less walk. That **pebble is dysphoria**. Other people don't have that pebble in their shoes, and they can't see it when you try to point it out. They just wonder why you walk funny, or why you think walking is a struggle. **Doing your best to walk normally with the pebble is like staying closeted**, silent pain with every step. **Limping with the pebble is like coming out**, and acknowledging that you have that pebble that makes you walk different than those without it. **Transitioning (in whatever way works for you) is removing that pebble piece by piece**. It takes time, but that pebble is eventually so small that there are days you even forget it was there in the first place.

3.5.1.1. Identification of Metaphorical Expressions

The starting point for identifying linguistic metaphors relevant to the experience of gender dysphoria was the MIPVU, a metaphor identification procedure developed at Vrije Universiteit (Steen et al., 2010). This is a more recent development of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) which was designed to identify metaphorical expressions in discourse by determining whether each lexical unit in a stretch of discourse can be described as metaphorical in its context of use.

MIPVU has been outlined below¹³:

1. Find metaphor-related words (MRWs) by examining the text on a word-by-word basis.
2. When a word is used indirectly and that use may potentially be explained by some form of cross-domain mapping from a more basic meaning of that word, mark the word as metaphorically used (MRW). In order to do this, the following procedure should be followed:

1. Identify the contextual meaning of the lexical unit¹⁴. The contextual meaning of a lexical unit is the meaning it has in the situation in which it is used.

¹³ Although MIPVU also identifies implicit metaphors, these were not included in this analysis, which focuses solely on direct and indirect linguistic metaphors that explicitly describe experiences of gender dysphoria.

¹⁴ The unit of analysis in MIP and MIPVU is the lexical unit, which in most cases is the individual word (Deignan, 2017, p. 209).

2. Check if there is a more basic meaning of the lexical unit. If there is, establish its identity. A more basic meaning of a lexical unit is defined as a more concrete, specific, and human-oriented sense in contemporary language use.
3. Determine whether the more basic meaning of the lexical unit is sufficiently distinct from the contextual meaning.
4. Examine whether the contextual meaning of the lexical unit can be related to the more basic meaning by some form of similarity.

If the results of instructions 2, 3, and 4 are positive, then a lexical unit should be marked as a metaphor-related word (MRW), which may be made more precise by adding the information that it is ‘indirect’ (MRW, indirect).

3. When a word is used directly and its use may potentially be explained by some form of cross-domain mapping to a more basic referent or topic in the text mark the word as direct metaphor (MRW, direct). Direct metaphors are identified as follows:
 1. Find local referent and topic shifts.
 - Good clues are provided by lexis which is “incongruous” (Cameron 2003; Charteris-Black 2004) with the rest of the text.
 2. Test whether the incongruous lexical units are to be integrated within the overall referential and/or topical framework by means of some form of comparison.
 - Good clues are provided by lexis which flags the need for some form of similarity or projection (Goatly, 1997).
 3. Test whether the comparison is nonliteral or cross-domain.
 4. Test whether the comparison can be seen as some form of indirect discourse about the local or main referent or topic of the text.
 - A provisional sketch of a mapping between the incongruous material functioning as source domain on the one hand and elements from the co-text functioning as target domain on the other should be possible.

If the findings of tests 2, 3, and 4 are positive, then a word should be marked for direct metaphor (‘MRW, direct’).

4. When a word functions as a signal that a cross-domain mapping may be at play, mark it as a metaphor flag (MFlag)¹⁵.

—Lexical signals of cross-domain mappings are words which signal to the language user that some form of contrast or comparison is being made (cf. Goatly 1997). Examples include *like*, *as*, *more*, *less*, and *more/less ... than*. More substantial lexical markers such as *compare*, *comparison* and *analogy* and complex mental conception markers such as *imagine*, *think* and *as if* are also metaphor signals.

5. When a word is a new-formation coined, examine the distinct words that are its independent parts according to steps 2 through 5.

(Steen et al., 2010: pp. 25-42)

MIPVU: Direct and Indirect Metaphors

As outlined above, Steen et al., (2010) identify two ways in which cross-domain mappings can manifest linguistically. Firstly, through language that is used directly, whereby there is no contrast between basic and contextual meanings, as is the case with similes and other “explicit invitations for comparison” (Steen et al. 2010, p. 11, in Semino et al., 2018). Direct metaphors comprise the majority of my dataset. Examples include: “Its like wearing wet clothes constantly. Its just uncomfortable and clings to you.”; “It's like a glitch in the Matrix, where everything feels wrong and it's hard to explain why”; and “it's like being left handed and being told all your life to write with your right hand”. In these examples, the metaphor flag “like” is used to introduce the comparison.

Secondly, cross-domain mappings can be expressed through language that is used indirectly, whereby there is a contrast between basic and contextual meanings. Indirect metaphors are extremely infrequent in the dataset, an example of an indirect metaphor includes: “once I ran out of prescribed life goals the dysphoria began to *crush* me, but even still it wasn't like a sumo wrestler sitting on me; instead it was like carrying one too many bricks” (italics added for emphasis). In this example, the verb “crush” is an indirect metaphor (MRW, indirect), as its contextual meaning of emotional distress differs from its basic meaning of physical compression.

¹⁵ Other terms for metaphor flag include signalling expression (Goatly, 1997) and tuning device (Cameron & Deignan, 2003).

The expression evokes a cross-domain mapping from the source domain of physical force to the target domain of the emotional burden of living with gender dysphoria. The metaphor develops from indirect to direct following the metaphor flag “like”. The author introduces two scenarios which reflect two different embodied experiences of struggle – they suggest that dysphoria is not like “a sumo wrestler sitting on [them]” but rather “carrying one too many bricks”. However, as mentioned above, indirect metaphors occur extremely infrequently in my data, perhaps due to the presence of a metalinguistic term in the title of each thread.

In this thesis, the terms ‘linguistic metaphor’ and ‘metaphor’ are used to refer to both direct and indirect metaphors.

The following section will explain the identification process for direct and indirect metaphors in addition to addressing metaphors which do not straightforwardly fit into either category. Before identifying linguistic metaphors, I made sure to carefully read through each thread in its entirety to familiarise myself with its content.

Direct Metaphors

Following MIPVU, direct metaphors were identified by the presence of a metaphor flag and linguistic evidence of a cross-domain mapping. The dataset included various metaphor flags such as “like”, “as”, “imagine” and metalinguistic terms such as “metaphor” or “analogy”. To establish metaphoricity, I relied both on the presence of these flags and on the contextual analysis of the entire stretch of text that followed. As can be seen in the below example, the metaphor flag “like” introduces a metaphorical comparison between wearing an ill-fitting shirt and the experience of gender dysphoria:

I usually say it’s like wearing the wrong shirt. It’s too small and the fabric is uncomfortable and the tag on the back is one of those stiff itchy ones that constantly irritates your skin. When you first put it on you kinda go “wow! This is unpleasant!” But you’re not allowed to take it off. “That shirt was a gift from your parents, how dare you want to take it off” “you just don’t really look good in other clothes! Just keep the shirt on!” “What if you decide later that you actually like the shirt. Try wearing it a bit more just to be sure.” Suddenly, there’s a day where you realize that you actually can just take

the shirt off, and when you do it feels amazing! You no longer want to rip off your skin, your neck isn't irritated anymore, you can breathe comfortably, its like you were never meant to wear the shirt in the first place.

Rather than coding individual words for metaphoricity, I treated the entire stretch of text following the flag as a single metaphor, as it realises a coherent ill-fitting shirt scenario drawing from a single source domain (in this case, a CLOTHING source domain). This approach allowed me to treat both single-word metaphors (e.g., “a journey”) and extended metaphorical expressions in which several words or phrases are used to express the same metaphorical comparison as single metaphorical realisations.

Indirect Metaphors

To identify indirect metaphors, I determined if a word was used indirectly by identifying its contextual meaning and determining if it has a more basic meaning. If this was the case, I would then determine whether the contextual meaning of the lexical unit could be understood in relation to its basic meaning. For example, in “once I ran out of prescribed life goals the dysphoria began to *crush* me” (italics added for emphasis), the verb “crush” refers to the overwhelming experience of living with gender dysphoria. While the basic meaning of “crush” refers to ‘compressing with violence’ (OED, 2025), its contextual meaning is to do with emotional distress. Thus, the contextual meaning can be understood in relation to its basic meaning and is identified as an indirect metaphor. It should be noted that “ran out of” and “prescribed” would also be coded as metaphorical in terms of MIPVU, but as they do not relate to gender dysphoria, they have not been included in this analysis.

Indirect metaphors can extend over longer stretches of text when multiple expressions clearly draw on the same source domain. In such cases, these expressions are treated as a single metaphorical instantiation of that domain rather than as multiple separate metaphors. For example in the above example, “I was crushed under the weight of it”, the lexical units “crushed” and “weight” are treated as one realisation of the WEIGHT source domain, rather than as two separate metaphors.

Borderline Direct and Indirect Metaphors

A small number of metaphors in the dataset cannot be straightforwardly classified as direct or indirect. These examples are not signalled. This is likely due to the interactional context - the title of the thread (for example, “Does anyone have any good analogies to communicate the seriousness of dysphoria to a cis person?”¹⁶) establishes that responses are expected to contain metaphorical comparisons. For example, one contributor proposes a scenario drawing from a JOB source domain:

Going to a job you hate every day. It’s not a bad job, and other people would love it, but going to this job every day is wearing you down and making you miserable and now everything just kinda ticks you off because of how much you hate your job.

There are two ways of analysing this metaphor. Firstly, one could argue that the signal is implicit because it has been provided by the interactional context (i.e., the thread title and surrounding comments). Alternatively, one could argue that this is an indirect metaphor where there is a contrast between the contextual and basic meaning. In this case, the basic meaning pertains to repeatedly doing something one hates but others like, whilst the contextual meaning relates to the experience of gender dysphoria. In cases such as these where the signalling expression is not present it is difficult to determine if the metaphor is direct or indirect. However, because this analysis does not quantify direct and indirect metaphors separately, the precise classification is not crucial. Regardless of whether one interprets this as a direct metaphor with an implicit signal or an indirect metaphor involving a contrast between basic and contextual meaning, for the purposes of this analysis it is counted as a metaphor for gender dysphoria. I consider as a single instance of metaphor a stretch of text that realises a single coherent metaphorical source domain, regardless of the number of words it involves.

3.5.1.2. Assigning Linguistic Metaphors to Source Domains

Once relevant metaphors were identified, they were assigned to a source domain based on their basic meanings (e.g., CLOTHING, JOB, TECHNOLOGY, FOOD/DRINK). For example, the following metaphor was assigned to a CLOTHING source domain:

¹⁶ For reasons of user privacy, this post title has been ethically fabricated.

Ill fitted formal wear but you just can't take it off

The source domain labels were created using a bottom-up approach. When creating the source domain labels, I tried to ensure a balance between nuance and generalisability as it is important to create categories that capture the nuances of the dataset whilst still allowing similar metaphorical linguistic expressions to be grouped (Cameron, Pelosi & Pedroso de Moraes Feltes, 2014). Once I had coded each thread in its entirety, I undertook a second round of coding. This was an iterative process; source domain labels were continually revised and refined to best fit the dataset to allow semantically similar metaphorical linguistic expressions to form semantic groupings (Declercq & van Poppel, 2023). For example, the following linguistic metaphor was annotated as belonging to a SPY source domain on the first round of coding:

Compare it to being a spy in a foreign country. You have an assumed identity and you can never just relax and be yourself. You are constantly on guard. Every relationship you have is tainted by the realization that they don't know who you are. They know the person you are pretending to be.

However, after encountering other similar metaphors such as being an “undercover superhero” the source domain was revised to SECRET IDENTITY. Thus, source domain labels were continually updated based on emerging patterns in the dataset.

After each metaphor was assigned to a source domain, I conducted a second stage of coding to identify more specific metaphorical scenarios within each domain. Musolff (2004, 2006) proposed scenarios as a more detailed unit of analysis in addition to conceptual metaphors. They are a “subdomain category” (Musolff, 2006, p. 24) which serve to bridge the gap between the “conceptual side of metaphor to its usage patterns in socially situated discourse” (Musolff, 2006, p. 36). Scenarios take the form of “mini-narratives” and are defined as “a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about ‘typical’ aspects of a source-situation, for example, its participants and their roles, the ‘dramatic’ storylines and outcomes, and conventional evaluations of whether they count as successful or unsuccessful, normal or

abnormal, permissible or illegitimate” (Musolff, 2006, p. 28). As indicated by this definition, scenarios importantly involve not just a sequence of events, but also associated evaluations, beliefs and assumptions (Deignan, 2017). Thus, they can reflect a speaker’s stance towards a topic.

In this study, I identified specific scenarios within each source domain to better understand how dysphoria is framed. For example, scenarios within the CLOTHING source domain included: ‘shoes too small’ scenarios and ‘wet clothing’ scenarios; scenarios within the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain included: ‘headache’ scenarios and ‘broken bone’ scenarios. The inclusion of scenarios enhances the analysis; source domains provide a broad overview of the dataset and allow one to view frequency information regarding frequent versus one-off source domains, while scenarios provide further insight into the variation within each source domain category.

It is during this stage of analysis that interpretation is inevitable (Declercq & van Poppel, 2023). Coding and categorising figurative language is subjective and I recognise that sometimes linguistic metaphors could be assigned to multiple different source domains. Returning to the ‘pebble in shoe’ example (reproduced below), this has been coded as belonging to a JOURNEY source domain and a ‘pebble in shoe’ scenario.

I like to think of it like a pebble in your shoe. Sometimes that pebble is barely noticeable, and you can walk just fine. Others it’s big enough to affect you with every step. Sometimes it’s big enough that you can’t even stand up, much less walk. That pebble is dysphoria. Other people don’t have that pebble in their shoes, and they can’t see it when you try to point it out. They just wonder why you walk funny, or why you think walking is a struggle. Doing your best to walk normally with the pebble is like staying closeted, silent pain with every step. Limping with the pebble is like coming out, and acknowledging that you have that pebble that makes you walk different than those without it. Transitioning (in whatever way works for you) is removing that pebble piece by piece. It takes time, but that pebble is eventually so small that there are days you even forget it was there in the first place.

This metaphor was coded under a JOURNEY source domain as the primary focus of the scenario is walking. However, it could also have been categorised under a CLOTHING source domain due to the important role the ‘shoe’ component plays in the scenario. I was able to overcome this ‘fuzziness’ through incorporating scenarios into my coding scheme as this subdomain category allowed me to clearly distinguish exactly how each source domain is being used.

In some cases, scenarios could be further grouped into subcategories to capture recurring patterns within a source domain. This was particularly relevant for broad domains such as CLOTHING, where distinct patterns emerged, including:

- *Ill-fitting clothing* (e.g., wearing shoes that are too small or a glove that is too tight),
- *Worn incorrectly* (e.g., wearing shoes on the wrong feet or a shirt backwards),
- *Unpleasant physical sensation* (e.g., wearing an itchy sweater or wearing wet clothing).

The inclusion of subcategories helps to organise the data and makes underlying patterns within broad source domains easier to identify and interpret.

It is important to note, however, that subcategories were not used as a separate level of coding. This analysis involved two levels of coding: source domains and scenarios. Subcategories were developed during interpretation to group together scenarios that displayed similar patterns within a domain. Their purpose is therefore descriptive and organisational rather than classificatory. They were only applied when a source domain demonstrated substantial internal variation. Some domains, such as HANDEDNESS for example, showed little variation in their scenarios and therefore did not require further categorisation into subcategories.

To summarise:

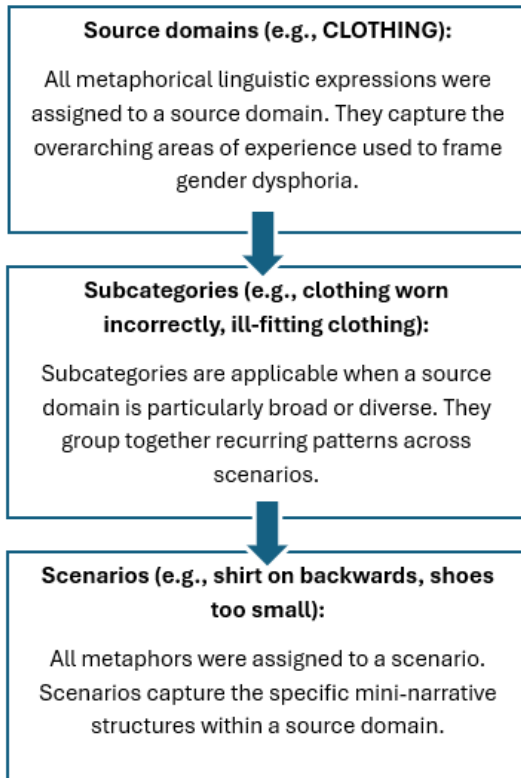


Figure 8. Relationship between source domains, subcategories and scenarios

3.6. Source Domain Overview

The source domain frequencies of the linguistic metaphors used to describe gender dysphoria in the data are provided in Table 4. It should be noted that for reasons of space, metaphors have been summarised under *Example Scenarios* rather than including direct quotations.

Table 4. Source domains, their frequencies, and example scenarios

Source Domain	Frequency	Example Scenarios
CLOTHING	40	Wearing dirty clothing; wearing wet clothing; wearing a costume
FOOD/DRINK	24	Being a food product in the wrong packaging
HEALTH/ILLNESS	23	Living with a toothache, headache, broken bone or phantom limb syndrome
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE	15	Being trapped in the Matrix; Pokémon Evolution

SPLIT SELF	14	Seeing the wrong reflection in the mirror; Being an adult trapped in a kid's body
TECHNOLOGY	13	Having the wrong software for one's hardware; Living in low resolution, with static or error pop-ups
JOURNEY	10	Undertaking a journey with a pebble in one's shoe; Sleepwalking through life
HANDEDNESS	9	Writing with one's non-dominant hand
JOB	9	Working a job one hates
UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE	9	Being covered in cotton candy or mud; Listening to incessant drumming, a fire alarm, or broken air conditioner
VEHICLE	8	Putting petrol in a diesel car
PUBLIC EMBARRASSMENT	5	Being naked or wetting oneself in public
ENTRAPMENT	5	Being trapped in a metal cage or a small box
TOYS AND GAMES	5	Being a puzzle with pieces that do not fit; Feeling like a Russian doll
MUTATION	5	Growing toenails from one's face; Growing an extra arm
METAMORPHOSIS	4	A caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly
SECRET IDENTITY	4	Living a double life as an undercover spy or superhero
ANIMALS	4	Being an ugly duckling
MISPLACEMENT/MISMATCH	3	Swapping the light and fan switches; Feeling like the furniture in one's house has been slightly moved
COLOUR	3	Being yellow when men are blue, women are pink and everyone in between is purple
FOOTBALL TEAMS	2	Supporting a different football team to one's family
NAGGING THOUGHT	2	Experiencing a nagging thought that something is wrong, for example, the feeling that you have forgotten something or left the oven on
HOMESICKNESS	2	Feeling homesick for a place you have never visited
WEIGHT	2	Carrying a weight on your shoulders

Other	10	Being stuck in a fog; Being a malfunctioning product; Experiencing uncanny valley
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In some cases, contributors develop another contributor’s metaphor. An example of this is illustrated below.

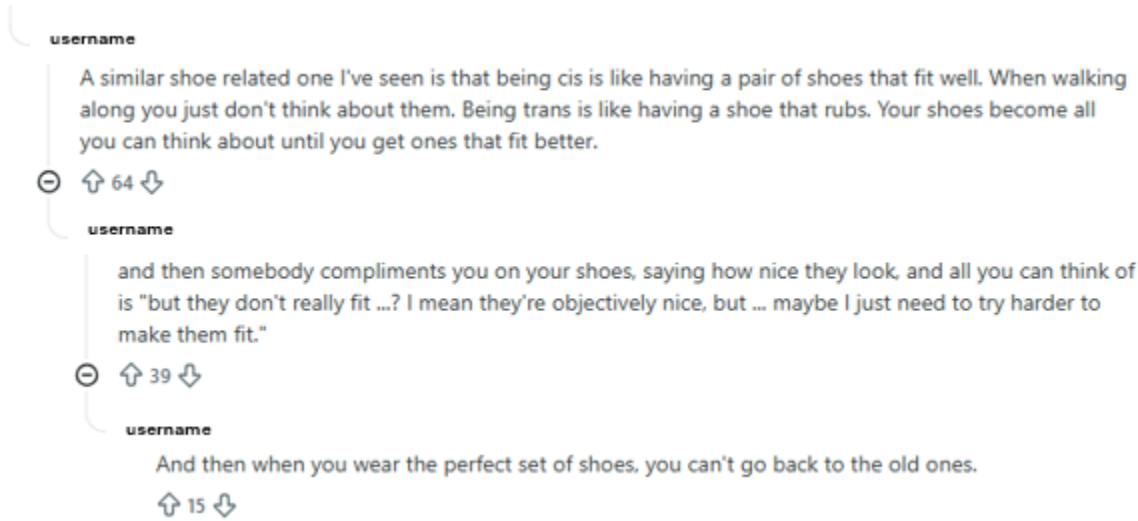


Figure 9. An example of metaphor development drawing from a CLOTHING source domain

The above example of metaphor development shows a comment thread in which the first poster uses an ‘ill-fitting shoes’ scenario drawing from a CLOTHING source domain to describe how gender dysphoria feels. This initial metaphor is then developed twice by two different contributors. For the purposes of quantification, only the first metaphor in this exchange has been included in the source domain frequency table as the two subsequent developments cannot stand alone and rely on the preceding context for interpretation. The decision to count only the initial metaphor in the source domain frequency table ensures that the frequency count reflects distinct metaphorical instantiations rather than repetitions or developments. Further examples of metaphor development are discussed and quantified in the following section on *Metaphor Evaluation*.

3.7. Metaphor Evaluation

In addition to coding the comments containing a metaphor for gender dysphoria, I also coded comments which offered an evaluation of metaphor. This enabled me to not only identify the

source domains used to conceptualise gender dysphoria but also examine which of these domains received evaluations within the community. More specifically, this level of coding provided insight into which source domains were endorsed and resisted by contributors and the reasons given for their evaluations.

Evaluative comments were identified across all twenty Reddit threads. A comment was coded as evaluative if it expressed either (i) a positive or negative stance towards a metaphor proposed elsewhere in the thread, or (ii) it expressed an opinion on the use of metaphor to talk about gender dysphoria more generally.

In addition, metaphor developments were coded as expressing endorsement when the development was congruent with the original use. These developments were therefore treated as a form of implicit endorsement, as they extend or elaborate an existing metaphor in ways that supports its framing. Each evaluative comment, whether explicit or implicit, was categorised as either expressing endorsement or resistance of metaphor use in Excel. An example of endorsement coding is presented below in Figure 10. Figure 10 shows the metaphor that is being endorsed, along with the source domain it draws from.

	A	B	C	D	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
1	Previous Source	<input type="text" value="Previous N"/>	<input type="text" value="Endorsemer"/>	<input type="text" value="Response"/>	<input type="text"/>										
2	UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE	"Think of a s	"God this is so /												
3	CLOTHING - COSTUME	"I always say	Oh my god, thi	Mhmm, and I imagine most cis people can imagine that too											
4	CLOTHING - SHOE ON WRONG FOOT	"One that ca	"Ooo this is a good one to represent that discomfort that (at first) is very hard to determine the cause of"												
5	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"I like it!												
6	HEALTH - TOOTHACHE	Imagine you	"LOL yes! And i /												
7	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"That is perfect /												
8	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"For me it was	"Same I always knew something wasn't right with me I just didn't know what and then puberty hit and I suddenly realized what it was"											
9	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"That is a good /												
10	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"This is awesor /												
11	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"Oh god. Yeah /												
12	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"What an insig /												
13	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"I really like thi /												
14	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once re	"So stealing thi /												
15	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"That is literall /												
16	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"See me at tab /												
17	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"This is a very g /												
18	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"Literally one o /												
19	HEALTH - PHANTOM LIMB SYNDROME	"It feels like p	Same /												

Figure 10. Screenshot of endorsement coding

Of the 538 comments spanning the twenty threads, 136 evaluative comments were initially identified, of which 102 involved endorsement and thirty-four involved resistance. To ensure that the analysis was focused on community evaluations rather than self-assessment several comments were excluded from analysis. Six endorsement comments were removed on the basis that one was explicitly framed as being written by an ally ("as a cis ally, I'm trying to learn whatever i can about you amazing people, so thank you for educating me"), and five involved contributors positively evaluating their own metaphor use (i.e., providing a metaphor and then explaining why they like it). Similarly, four resistance comments were excluded on the basis that two involved contributors resisting metaphors they mentioned themselves (e.g., "there is of course the analogy of putting diesel into a gas tank, but I'm not a big cars person, so I didn't feel comfortable going that way") and two comments were not focused on metaphor (e.g., "that is a pretty personal belief"). Thus, after reviewing the comments a total of ninety-six endorsement comments and thirty resistance comments were included for further analysis.

3.7.1. Coding Framework for Endorsement

Previous research on metaphor endorsement has identified different forms of endorsement, including explicit endorsement i.e., explicit praise of/ agreement with metaphor (Mathieson et al., 2015) and more implicit forms of endorsement i.e., metaphor shifting (Cameron, 2008, 2010). However, the labels *explicit* and *implicit* have not necessarily been used to systematically distinguish between these forms. Building on this work, I adopted a broad definition of endorsement and included both explicit and implicit endorsement when coding (though I distinguish between them during analysis). Once all instances of endorsement were identified (as illustrated in Figure 10), I found that they could be subsumed under three broad categories as shown below in Table 5. The coding of endorsement examples into these categories is presented in Figure 11.

Table 5. Endorsement categories

Endorsement type	Definition	Example
Generic endorsement	Positive evaluation of a metaphor without further elaboration or justification. This category aligns closely with Mathieson et al.'s., (2015) <i>praise of/agreement with a metaphor</i> . Although previous studies have noted that generic endorsements typically involve explicit metalanguage, the threads analysed here were already highly metalinguistic. I therefore included all brief expressions of approval even when they did not contain explicit metalanguage, as they clearly functioned as positive evaluations of metaphor.	“I like it!”; “Good one”
Justified endorsement	Positive evaluation of a metaphor supported by a reason or explanation. This phenomenon has hardly been explored in the metaphor endorsement literature.	“I love your metaphor (...) you don’t relate it to sickness or pain. You aren’t giving anyone a reason to think of us as abnormal or unfortunate, or worse in any way.”
Metaphor shifting	The repetition, rephrasing, or development of a metaphor in a way that is congruent with its original use. This category introduced by Cameron (2008, 2010) includes <i>vehicle development</i> (repetition, relexicalisation, contrast, explication), <i>vehicle redeployment</i> , and <i>literalisation</i> . It also has links to Mathieson et al.’s (2015) <i>elaboration/extension</i> category. However, only instances which are congruent with the metaphor’s original use have been coded as endorsement here – Cameron (2008, 2010) does not make this distinction.	“it’s like wearing shoes the wrong way your entire life and wondering why your feet hurt all the time and why you have hip/knee issues.” → “and when you complain about it, everyone is angry at you because their shoes are just fine.”

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Previous Source	Previous N	Endorsemer	Response	Code		
2	UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE	"Think of a s	"God this is so	/	GENERIC		
3	CLOTHING - COSTUME	"I always say	Oh my god, thi	Mhmm, and I	MET SHIFTING		
4	CLOTHING - SHOE ON WRONG FOOT	"One that ca	"Ooo this is a good one to repre		JUSTIFIED (particular aspect)		
5	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"I like it!		GENERIC		
6	HEALTH - TOOTHACHE	Imagine you	"LOL yes! And i	/	MET SHIFTING		
7	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"That is perfect	/	JUSTIFIED (particular aspect)		
8	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"For me it was	"Same I always	MET SHIFTING		
9	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"That is a good	/	GENERIC		
10	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"This is awesor	/	GENERIC		
11	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"Oh god. Yeah	/	GENERIC		
12	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"What an insigl	/	JUSTIFIED (simple)		
13	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"I really like thi	/	GENERIC		
14	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"So stealing thi	/	GENERIC		
15	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"That is literally	/	GENERIC		
16	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"See me at tab	/	MET SHIFTING		
17	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"This is a very	g	GENERIC		
18	FOOD - SALTWATER	So, i once rea	"Literally one o	/	MET SHIFTING		
19	HEALTH - PHANTOM LIMB SYNDROME	"It feels like p	Same	/	GENERIC		

Figure 11. Screenshot of endorsement type coding

The frequencies for each type of endorsement identified in the dataset are as follows:

- Generic endorsement: 53 comments
- Justified endorsement: 17 comments
- Metaphor shifting: 26 comments

Following the initial categorisation, I undertook a more fine-grained analysis of the ‘Metaphor shifting’ comments according to the type of shifting they demonstrated, and the ‘Justified endorsement’ comments according to the justification provided. When determining the type of metaphor shifting a comment exemplified, I consulted Cameron’s (2008, 2010) model which includes vehicle development (repetition, relexicalisation, contrast, explication), vehicle redeployment, and literalisation.

Categorising the types of justified endorsement proved more challenging as there has been limited research on the reasons why individuals explicitly endorse metaphors. To address this, I inductively developed four categories of justified endorsement based on recurring patterns in the dataset:

- (1) *Relatability of the source domain* which was further subdivided into (a) *personal relatability*, where commentors suggested that a metaphor linked to their own lived experiences, and (b) *general relatability*, where commentors suggested that a metaphor would be broadly accessible to others.
- (2) *Effectively captures a particular aspect of target domain*, where commentors valued metaphors for aptly representing a particular aspect of the gender dysphoria experience.
- (3) *Simplicity*, where commentors valued metaphors for being concise, brief and/or clear.
- (4) *Positive representation*, where contributors expressed appreciation for metaphors that framed the experience of gender dysphoria in an affirming or validating way.

These categories will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 8 on Metaphor Evaluation.

3.7.2. Coding Framework for Resistance

A similar process was undertaken for the coding of metaphor resistance. Comments expressing a negative evaluation of a previous metaphor or the use of figurative language to talk about gender dysphoria more generally were inputted into an Excel spreadsheet (Figure 12). In one instance, a commentor resisted two source domains (JOB and CLOTHING) within a single comment:

What I miss is that nobody will be leaving you when you change your job or your sweater. Changing these things happen on a regular basis. Changing your gender is not that normal (yet).

Therefore, while thirty comments expressed resistance, a total of thirty-one codes were applied.

In addition, almost half of the resistance comments (14 of 31; 45%) did not refer to a previous source domain but rather objected to the use of figurative language to talk about gender dysphoria more generally.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
1	Previous Sour	Previous Metaphor	Resistance	Defense	Reponse 2	Resolution								
2	MALFUNCTIONIN	"I kinda just compare bei	"Eh, it's not a bad metapl	"I get how you can see	"Norm doesn't mean th	"It is normal though. There have been trans people as long as there have been people, for thousands of years and i								
3	FOOD/DRINK - CA	Despite not being a viewe	Metaphors like this are ve	"Haha, that's totally fai		"Oh yeah that makes a lot of sense! I can totally see where you are coming from. :)"								
4	FOOD/DRINK - CC	"Thought I'd do a little ar	"This analogy leaves out t	/	/									
5	SOCCER TEAMS	"I think if you do it, try to	"This is a good one, but d	This is true, of course, k	I think if you asked a tr	/								
6	JOB	Abigail Thorn from Philosi	I'm not sure that's a good	/	/	/								
7	FIG LANG in gene	FIG LANG in general	"I'm not a fan of trying to	/	/	/								
8	TECHNOLOGY - S	"It is like having the wron	"I like this one, but they a	You can break it down €	/	/								
9	SPLIT SELF	I'd say to tell them it's lik	"I can kind of see this one	/	/	/								
10	FIG LANG in gene	FIG LANG in general	I decided some time ago	/	/	/								
11	FIG LANG in gene	FIG LANG in general	"Warning: ramble alert.H	/	/	/								
12	FIG LANG	FIG LANG	"Warning: ramt	"I like to point out that th	/	/								
13	FIG LANG	Warning: ramble alert.Hc	"Really good points! I thir	All good points, Just a c	/	/								
14	FIG LANG in gene	FIG LANG in general	"Men can grow breasts, g	/	/	/								
15	FIG LANG	FIG LANG	"I don't bother, I think try	OP	"I would argue that	/								
16	FIG LANG	FIG LANG	"Just give them opposite	/	/	/								
17	VEHICLE	"Idk about favorite but he	"I like this one, bit I also r	/	/	/								
18	VEHICLE	"Mine is for hormone the	Don't diesel engines expl	"With more than a sma	/	/								
19	CLOTHING - SHOE	"Imagine that you out yo	"The only thing I'm missir	/	/	/								
20	JOB/ITCHY SWEAT	I liked Abigail Thorne's m	"What I mis is that nobody will be leaving you when you change your job or your sweater. Changing these things happen on a regular basis. Changing your gender is not that normal (yet)."											

Figure 12. Screenshot of resistance coding

Unlike endorsement, all instances of resistance included some form of justification, ranging from brief evaluative statements to lengthy explanations. No examples of generic resistance (e.g., “I don’t like it”) were identified. After identifying all instances of resistance (as shown in Figure 12), further coding was undertaken to determine the reasons underpinning them.

To guide this process, I drew on Declercq and van Poppel’s (2024) framework for metaphor evaluation which integrates several theories and typologies of metaphor evaluation (e.g., Cameron, 2008, 2010; Tay, 2014; Mathieson et al., 2015; van Poppel & Pilgrim, 2023). Following van Poppel and Pilgrim (2023), Declercq and van Poppel (2024) distinguish between four levels of resistance: propositional, locutional, personal, and situational. Propositional resistance relates to how a domain is represented or the similarities between domains. Locutional resistance relates to the mappings made between domains. Personal resistance focuses on the person proposing the metaphor (e.g., their authority or credibility). Finally, situational resistance concerns the appropriateness of a metaphor or its use in a given context.

While this framework provided a useful starting point, its categories were too broad to fully account for the specific reasons for resistance given in the Reddit threads. Therefore, I adapted and refined the model, inductively developing additional sub-categories to reflect the justifications found in the dataset. Moreover, only propositional and locutional forms of resistance were found in the Reddit threads; no examples of personal or situational resistance (as defined by Declercq and van Poppel, 2024) were identified.

The revised framework presented below (Table 6) maintains the broad distinction between propositional and locutional resistance but extends it to include experiential and generic forms of resistance, in addition to new subcategories within propositional and locutional resistance.

Table 6. Adaptations of Declercq and van Poppel’s (2024) framework

Main category	Subcategory	Definition	Example
Propositional resistance (cf. van Poppel &	Negative entailments	The metaphor carries problematic or inaccurate assumptions	"Eh, it's not a bad metaphor for how we're treated, but it makes us seem like we're defective."; "This

Pilgrim, 2023)	(material premise)	(e.g., implying that being trans is a choice, defect, or illness)	is a good one, but does involve 'choice'. Being trans does not.”
	Vagueness (material premise)	The metaphor is too general or not specific to the target domain	“Metaphors like this are very personal. Personally I don't like your cake analogy because I feel like cake is uuuh, just not a very big deal? :P (...) Well without being flippant, the issue for me is that the cake metaphor is just a really vague metaphor, it could be used for any random thing where you are thinking about doing a different/new thing. Like, the cake metaphor could be used for changing your wardrobe, or hairstyle. It doesn't really touch upon anything more concrete and specific to being transgender to me”
	Limited scope (material premise)	The metaphor omits key aspects of the experience or applies only partially	"For me personally the itchy sweater does not cover it all. I can nowadays change a sweater without impact. Changing my gender is not without impact. (...)”
	Mappings do not work (connecting premise)	The source-target mapping does not ‘work’ in reality; literal knowledge of the source domain contradicts with the metaphor	“Don't diesel engines explode if you run gasoline through them?”
Locutional resistance (cf. van Poppel & Pilgrim, 2023)	Lack of clarity	The metaphor is unclear or difficult to understand	“I'm not sure that's a good analogy, I have trouble following that one.”; “I don't really get it. What do the shoes represent? (...)”

Experiential resistance	Lack of personal resonance with the source domain	The metaphor is intelligible but does not personally resonate	"i like this one, but I also really like riding my motorbike. so I guess this one doesn't work for me xD"
	Lack of familiarity with the source domain	The metaphor is intelligible but the audience are not familiar with the source domain	"I like this one, but they are not really computer people so they might not get the analogy fully. I can see what your going for with it, so I will keep this idea in mind thanks."
General resistance	Resistance to figurative language for a given target domain	Resistance to the use of metaphor to talk about gender dysphoria	"We don't need analogies, cis people can experience gender dysphoria."

3.8. Data and Methodology Summary

The chapter has outlined the data source and the methodological and ethical considerations encountered during data collection and analysis. It has described how the metaphors were collected, identified and systematically coded according to their source domain and scenario. In addition, the process of identifying and categorising instances of metaphor evaluation has been detailed, with a focus on the various forms of evaluation identified in the dataset.

The following chapter will provide an overview of the source domains with a frequency above five, before discussing the three most frequently occurring source domains, CLOTHING, FOOD/DRINK and HEALTH/ILLNESS in depth.

Chapter 4: Source Domains for Gender Dysphoria

This chapter provides an overview of the source domains used to conceptualise gender dysphoria in the dataset, with a particular focus on those occurring more than five times. Across the twenty Reddit threads, thirty-four distinct source domains were identified. Their frequencies are summarised in Table 7 below. It should be noted that many of the source domains overlap – in naturally occurring language data it is not always possible to neatly categorise metaphors as some expressions draw on elements of more than one source domain. Therefore, overlaps are highlighted and discussed where relevant in the overviews below.

To analyse variation within each source domain, this chapter also considers the scenarios that comprise them. Scenarios refer to the mini-narrative structures that metaphors draw upon within a given source domain (e.g., the scenario of wearing ill-fitting shoes within the CLOTHING source domain). Each metaphorical linguistic expression regardless of its length or complexity was assigned to a single scenario. These scenarios are summarised in Table 7 which also lists every source domain and its frequency. In total, 230 metaphorical linguistic expressions were identified and assigned to scenarios across the dataset.

The three most frequently used source domains – CLOTHING (Chapter 5), FOOD/DRINK (Chapter 6), and HEALTH/ILLNESS (Chapter 7) – are discussed in more detail in dedicated chapters.

Table 7. Source domains, their frequencies, and example scenarios

Source Domain	Frequency	Example Scenarios
CLOTHING	40	Wearing dirty clothing, wet clothing or a costume
FOOD/DRINK	24	Being a food product in the wrong packaging
HEALTH/ILLNESS	23	Living with a toothache, headache, broken bone or phantom limb syndrome
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE	15	Being trapped in the Matrix; Pokémon evolution
SPLIT SELF	14	Seeing the wrong reflection in the mirror; Being an adult trapped in a child's body
TECHNOLOGY	13	Having the wrong software for one's hardware; Living in low resolution or with error pop-ups

JOURNEY	10	Undertaking a journey with a pebble in one's shoe; Sleepwalking through life
HANDEDNESS	9	Writing with one's non-dominant hand
JOB	9	Working a job one hates
UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE	9	Being covered in cotton candy or mud; Listening to incessant drumming, a fire alarm, or a broken air conditioner
VEHICLE/WRONG FUEL	8	Putting petrol in a diesel car
PUBLIC EMBARRASSMENT	5	Being naked or wetting oneself in public
ENTRAPMENT	5	Being trapped in a metal cage or a small box
TOYS AND GAMES	5	Being a puzzle with pieces that do not fit; Feeling like a Russian doll
MUTATION	5	Growing toenails from one's face; Growing an extra arm
METAMORPHOSIS	4	A caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly
SECRET IDENTITY	4	Living a double life as an undercover spy or superhero
ANIMALS	4	Being an ugly duckling
MISPLACEMENT/MISMATCH	3	Swapping the light and fan switches; Feeling like the furniture in one's house has been slightly moved
COLOUR	3	Being yellow when men are blue, women are pink and everyone in between is purple
FOOTBALL TEAMS	2	Supporting a different football team to one's family
NAGGING THOUGHT	2	Experiencing a nagging thought that something is wrong, for example, the feeling that you have forgotten something or left the oven on
HOMESICKNESS	2	Feeling homesick for a place you have never visited
WEIGHT	2	Carrying a weight on your shoulders
Other	10	Being stuck in a fog; Being a malfunctioning product; Experiencing uncanny valley

4.1. CLOTHING Metaphors

The CLOTHING source domain is the most frequently used source domain in the dataset, with forty occurrences. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that clothing has strong associations with identity (Sennett, 2003; Shilling, 2003; Strübel et al., 2022) and is a key site for the performance and negotiation of gender (Butler, 1990). In addition, clothing is a factor used to make assumptions about gender (Bettcher, 2007). However, the CLOTHING source domain is not used in an overtly gendered way in the dataset. That is, contributors do not express discomfort about wearing literal gendered garments (e.g., dresses, suits). Rather, the CLOTHING metaphors focus on familiar embodied experiences, such as wearing ill-fitting clothing, to articulate bodily and social dysphoria.

There are two main themes underlying the CLOTHING metaphors: (1) discomfort and (2) concealment, both of which will be explored in further detail in Chapter 5. Discomfort clothing metaphors comprise scenarios in which an individual describes an item of clothing that is unpleasant to wear because it is ill-fitting, worn incorrectly, or has an unpleasant physical sensation. This discomfort is often physical (as illustrated below), although in some cases it may be emotional or psychological.

Example 4.1.

My story was about shoes. To me it was like having ill fitting shoes. But they were your shoes. You always had those shoes they fit how they fit and just assumed that every one else's shoes fit the same way. You were none the wiser that others had different shoes. Then you get to try on some different shoes and they fit so much better. You're like Wow! I can have these shoes and you realize you're not stuck in the horrible shoes where your toe sticks out and leaves blisters everywhere. So you get the new shoes and suddenly your feet don't hurt and your posture is better and you feel great.

CLOTHING metaphors can be linked to both the concepts of dys-appearance and eu-appearance. Dys-appearance occurs when the body shifts from a backgrounded presence to an intrusive one (Leder, 1990), whereas eu-appearance describes moments when the body feels effortless and pleasurable (Zeiler, 2010). In scenarios where clothing is ill-fitting, such as wearing shoes that

rub, the body is foregrounded through friction, mirroring how dys-appearance makes the body feel persistently present. Conversely, in scenarios where clothing fits well, such as when wearing shoes that fit comfortably, the body disappears into the background and can be experienced more positively as eu-appearance. CLOTHING metaphors thus capture how bodily awareness can shape how dysphoria is experienced.

Unlike Discomfort clothing metaphors, which address how dysphoria feels internally, Concealment clothing metaphors emphasise how it is perceived externally. Thus, they focus less on body dysphoria and more on social dysphoria:

Example 4.2.

I always say “imagine being in a costume that you can’t take off and nobody believes your wearing”

Concealment clothing metaphors involve scenarios in which the true self is hidden or obscured by an item of clothing, typically a costume or mask. While costumes and masks evoke ideas of performance, here the performance is involuntary and exhausting. Contributors frequently express frustration at being perceived and treated as the costume they are wearing rather than the person beneath it, which may speak to the invalidation of trans experiences. This reflects Austin et al.’s (2022) finding that gender dysphoria can be characterised by the struggle associated with having an internal sense of self that cannot be accurately seen or shown to others.

Together, clothing metaphors that focus on discomfort and concealment highlight how the CLOTHING source domain can be used to articulate both the embodied and social dimensions of gender dysphoria.

4.2. FOOD/DRINK Metaphors

FOOD/DRINK is the second most frequent source domain in the dataset (n=24) which is surprising given that this source domain is not generally used to talk about difficult experiences in English. However, its frequency can potentially be explained by the aims of many of the threads, namely, to develop a metaphor that cisgender people can understand. Food and drink and their associated components including bodily sensations such as thirst, bodily reactions such as allergies and

intolerances, and preferences for one food or drink item over another are widely relatable experiences. There are two types of FOOD/DRINK metaphors, both of which are explored further in Chapter 6: (1) Either/Or metaphors and (2) Internal/External metaphors, each highlighting different aspects of gender dysphoria.

In Either/Or metaphors, a user describes a scenario in which they must choose between two food/drink options, or they are given one of two options. Initially, they receive the wrong option without realising it but later discover through experience that the other option is better suited to them.

Example 4.3.

Imagine you are in a restaurant. Everyone orders water, and so do you, but for some reason, you receive salt water. Now, to the naked eye, fresh water and salt water look identical. However, instead of hydrating you, it dehydrates. Naturally you complain about the taste, which you find revolting, but everyone just tells you to drink more, even though it's the issue. But you don't know that. For all you can tell, your water is identical to everyone else's. It is only when you venture out to try someone else's water that you realize that the problem isn't yours.

In some cases, contributors introduce an allergy or intolerance component to emphasise the severity of their dysphoria:

Example 4.4.

Imagine a world, where everyone drinks milk. You drink milk too, but it makes your stomach ache, and it gives you gas. For the longest time, you didn't think much of it, but as time goes on, your body starts finding the milk to be more and more unpalatable, so you seek help and ask the others how they're handling all the stomach cramps and other digestive issues so well. They look at you a bit funny, bemused, not sure what you're talking about, and that's when it hits you: this isn't normal, others aren't having these issues. You learn that there is a name for people like you: lactose intolerant.

The allergy/intolerance component shifts the focus from discomfort to potentially life-threatening harm, reinforcing the seriousness of dysphoria. While such scenarios could be categorised under the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain, their primary focus on consumption justifies their categorisation under the FOOD/DRINK domain.

The second type of FOOD/DRINK metaphor, Internal/External food/drink metaphors, involve the contributor explicitly comparing the self to a food/drink product in the wrong container or packaging.

Example 4.5.

When I describe dysphoria it's like buying a can of corn. On the outside, the label says corn. To everyone that sees the can, it is accepted that it is corn. You open the lid, and green beans are inside the can.

This metaphor is an elaboration of the container image schema; the body (container) and identity (contents) are conceptualised as separate entities, and dysphoria emerges when the two are incongruent. Thus, this metaphor expresses a misalignment between one's internal identity and outward physical appearance. It highlights the role of social perception and the pain of being misgendered based on outward appearance. Unlike the Either/Or food/drink metaphors, which emphasise gradual self-realisation, Internal/External food/drink metaphors foreground social dysphoria and its associated emotional toll. Both types of food/drink metaphor will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

4.3. HEALTH/ILLNESS Metaphors

The HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain is the third most frequent in the dataset, with twenty-three occurrences. This domain is broad, encompassing a wide range of illnesses, conditions, and injuries. Contributors draw on both chronic and acute conditions (e.g., PCOS, tinnitus, gangrene, toothache, fevers) as well as physical injuries (e.g., broken bones) to articulate the severity and persistence of gender dysphoria. These metaphors frame gender dysphoria as something which requires medical care, treatment, or ongoing management. While the use of medicalised

metaphors may help to validate the seriousness of gender dysphoria, they could also potentially pathologize it, a tension that will be further explored in Chapter 7.

As El Refaie (2019) argues, illness or injury often disrupts a person's habitual ways of engaging with the world. The body, typically a taken for granted, backgrounded presence, can suddenly force itself into conscious awareness as something “wrong,” “bad,” or “alien”—a phenomenon Leder (1990) terms dys-appearance (El Refaie, 2019, p. 32). Many contributors express a similarly complex relationship with their bodies where dysphoria makes them hyperaware of their body, affecting their daily life. This notion is exemplified in the below scenario:

Example 4.6.

Experiencing gender is like experiencing a bone. You only notice it if it's broken.

Some Redditors use the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain to express discomfort with particular body parts. In some cases, an individual may feel as though they have parts missing, and the discomfort is described in terms of an absence:

Example 4.7.

It feels like phantom limb syndrome for parts I wasn't born with

In other cases, contributors describe discomfort in terms of an unwanted presence, using imagery of growths or tumours to convey how dysphoric body parts feel intrusive or alien:

Example 4.8.

And also like my chest has some weird growth or graph on it.

This highlights how dysphoria can be related to particular body parts, particularly those associated with secondary sex characteristics such as the chest.

Overall, the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain captures the shifting and evolving nature of gender dysphoria both within and across individuals, a finding also observed by Austin et al., (2022).

Austin et al., (2022) noted that some individuals experienced their gender dysphoria as a constant, debilitating presence, whilst others described the ebb and flow of dysphoria, highlighting that there is not one static dysphoric experience. A finding that has important implications for gender-affirming care.

4.4. INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE Metaphors

There is a total of fifteen INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE metaphors in the dataset in which contributors make reference to films, television series, video games, novels, and music that they feel capture their experience of gender dysphoria. These metaphors are a form of intertextuality which use shared cultural reference points to express complex feelings in terms of recognisable narratives, potentially making them more accessible to a cisgender audience. Two main subcategories of INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE metaphors emerged: (1) Alienation/Disconnection metaphors which include scenarios describing estrangement from one’s body, and (2) Growth/Regeneration metaphors which include scenarios framing gender-affirmation as an empowering process of becoming.

Table 8. Intertextual references

Source	Media	Frequency
Matrix	Film	4
Men in Black	Film	1
Lord of the Rings	Film	1
Freaky Friday	Film	1
Dr Who	Television Series	1
Body Swap	Television Series	1
Neon Genesis Evangelion	Television Series	1
Quantum Leap	Television Series	1
Pokémon	Video Game	1
Frankenstein	Novel	1
Kafka Metamorphosis	Novel	1
Out of the Blue, by Electric Light Orchestra	Album	1

The most frequent intertextual reference made is to *The Matrix* (n=4), through which contributors compare gender dysphoria to “a glitch in the Matrix” or “a splinter in one’s mind”:

Example 4.9.

It's like a glitch in the Matrix, where everything feels wrong and it's hard to explain why

This metaphor allows contributors to express the persistent feeling that something is “wrong” without initially being aware of the source of their discomfort. Much like the film’s protagonist, Neo, before his awakening, they are aware of a disruption but lack the language to explain it.

Thus, *The Matrix* scenarios may be used to express the process of gradual self-realisation.

This reference is particularly salient given the trans subtext of *The Matrix* (and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*). Both directors of *The Matrix* trilogy, Lana and Lilly Wachowski, are trans women, and Lilly has confirmed that the trilogy is about “the desire for transformation” conceived from a “closeted point of view” (BBC Newsbeat, 2020). In a Netflix interview, she said she was “glad that it has gotten out” that this was the original intention. She also expressed her gratitude that the films have been “throwing them [trans people] a rope to help them on their journey”. Early drafts of the film included the character named Switch who was a man in the real world and a woman in the Matrix, directly addressing the concepts of fluidity and transformation.

Other references within the Alienation/Disconnection subcategory foreground the sense of a split self (for further discussion of SPLIT SELF metaphors, see 4.5 *SPLIT SELF Metaphors*), including *Men in Black*, *Body Swap*, *Freaky Friday*, *Quantum Leap*, *Frankenstein*, and *Metamorphosis*. These scenarios include characters inhabiting bodies that do not feel like their own, reflecting trans contributors' descriptions of mind-body incongruence:

Example 4.10.

Mine is that before transition and hrt [hormone replacement therapy] I always felt like that edgar character from mib [men in black] flailing around and trying to act normal while controlling a body that wasn't his. Obviously in a less creepy alien way lol

Example 4.11.

You feel like Sam Beckett from Quantum Leap -- You're forced into playing a role you have no familiarity with, facing mirror images that are not your own, and are just awkwardly trying to meet social expectations to pass yourself off as normal.

Both of these examples foreground a mind-body split whereby the protagonist must function in a body that feels alien, highlighting feelings of powerlessness and a lack of control. Both metaphors emphasise the effort required to act “normal” despite feeling as though one is inhabiting another’s body. Acting “normal” here may refer to attempting to live as a gender identity with which one does not identify. This mind-body disconnection aligns with findings by Austin et al., (2022) in which participants often described feeling as though they were living in the “wrong” body. Despite the increasing pushback in recent years against “trapped in the wrong body” narratives (Austin et al., 2022), metaphors likening the body to a costume, as something alien, or as belonging to someone else, were frequent in conceptualisations of dysphoria, presenting it as an incredibly difficult way to live one’s life. These metaphors also have clear links with other source domains in the dataset. For example, they link to costume scenarios in the CLOTHING source domain and Internal/External food/drink metaphors in FOOD/DRINK domain where the misalignment between outward physical appearance and internal reality is similarly foregrounded.

The second subcategory, Growth/Regeneration, positively frames gender affirmation as a process of development and transformation:

Example 4.12.

I’ve used the analogy of Pokémon evolution a few times with success. Pre-coming out I was like squirtle. (...) But I knew eventually things would change and I’d finally get to become the real me. (...) The “transition” phase was wortortle. It was awkward and a clearly visible change where something was obviously happening to me physically and mentally. But it wasn’t permanent- the changes kept happening until that phase was over. Finally after a few years I’d reached my final form and felt complete as Blastoise- confident, powerful, and mature. Compare squirtle to Blastoise and the visual difference

is massive, but the core is the same. I wouldn't have gotten to be Blastoise if squirtle didn't exist. (...) It was really an evolution for me.

Again, this metaphor relies on a 'split'; however, the split here is temporal between the self at different points in time, rather than between the body and mind. This metaphor frames transition as a natural evolution towards the best and most authentic version of the self. This comparison not only celebrates change but validates earlier identities, suggesting that they were necessary precursors to becoming one's true self.

Another contributor compares gender affirmation to *Doctor Who* Regeneration which similarly frames it in an empowering way. In *Doctor Who*, regeneration allows the Doctor to transform physically while retaining his core identity and values. This suggests regeneration is a means of expressing the self more fully or ensuring that the physical aligns with the internal.

Growth/Regeneration metaphors differ from Alienation/Disconnection metaphors, whilst Alienation metaphors emphasise misalignment and lack of agency, Growth/Regeneration metaphors foreground self-actualisation and empowerment.

The use of intertextual references demonstrates how existing media can take on different meanings depending on the consumer's lived experiences. Contributors select texts that resonate with their personal experiences of gender dysphoria and suggest that these narratives and/or story worlds may help a cisgender audience better understand them. For cis audiences these metaphors may 'work' because they are relatable, for trans audiences these metaphors may take on additional meanings, particularly when the chosen text has a queer or trans subtext. In this way, the texts may become an in-group identity marker.

4.5. SPLIT SELF Metaphors

SPLIT SELF as a source domain label is highly schematic and the notion of a split self underlies other metaphor types in the dataset (as discussed in the INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE section above). Despite its schematicity, this label is used here due to its wide currency and use in

previous research on metaphor and trans lived experiences (e.g., Lederer, 2015, 2019 and the DIVIDED SELF¹⁷).

Two types of SPLIT SELF metaphor were identified in the dataset: splits between the mind and body (n=12) and splits between past and present selves (n=1). The most conventional type of split, and the one identified most frequently in the dataset, is the mind-body split. In these metaphors (also known as DIVIDED SELF metaphors) a person is thought of as being comprised of two entities: a subject (one's consciousness) and a self (one's body) (Lakoff, 1996, p. 99). Typically, the subject is thought of as being inside the self or in possession of the self (Lakoff, 1996). There is an understanding that the inner private self is the essential or "real" self (i.e., with the same values as the subject) while the external, public self is just a veneer (Lakoff, 1996, p. 108). The folk notion that we are "inside" our bodies is pervasive (Emmott, 2002); the body is understood to be a container for one's thoughts, feelings, and identity (El Refaie, 2019).

SPLIT SELF metaphors take on a further layer of meaning in relation to trans identities, as many trans people stress that their physical appearance does not reflect their inner self. Austin et al., (2022) note that "participants recognize self as residing in the mind rather the body" (p. 15). This notion is exemplified in the Reddit dataset where MIND-BODY SPLIT SELF metaphors are used to express a complex and often fraught relationship with the body. One contributor describes their brain-body connection as "severed" while another said it was like their consciousness had been "dropped into someone else's body". In other examples, the body is explicitly framed as "wrong" or "bad".

Example 4.13.

I'd say to tell them it's like if you woke up and looked in the mirror and saw Trump or someone else that they hate everyday, but inside they know themselves as they are now. I never hated myself as much as I hate that douche but I definitely had a lot of self loathing.

¹⁷ Please note Lederer (2015, 2019) uses the term DIVIDED SELF, I use the term SPLIT SELF due to its wider currency in metaphor research.

Here, an incongruence is present between the inner self (“inside they know themselves as they are now”) and an outward physical appearance one loathes, which in this case is specified as Donald Trump. In the above example, the contributor seems to emphasise that their body does not belong to them; they perceive it as “alien”, foregrounding feelings of powerlessness and a lack of agency.

SPLIT SELF metaphors are not only used to express a complex and potentially problematic relationship with the body, they are also used to express moments of gender euphoria.

Example 4.14.

Seeing myself in the mirror for the first time was as if I finally got reunited with somebody I missed my entire life.

Here, the split between mind and body is reconciled, as the body finally reflects the self perceived “in the mind’s eye” (Austin et al., 2022, p. 15). Gender euphoria, the feeling of joy experienced when one’s gendered expression aligns with one’s gender identity rather than with the gender assigned at birth (Ashley & Ells, 2018), extends Zelier’s (2010) notion of eu-appearance, where the body is experienced either pre-reflectively or reflectively, as something good or easy.

The second type of SPLIT SELF metaphor found in the dataset involves a temporal split between a past and present self, i.e., between one’s former and current gender identity. In the following example, each self is presented as a different individual with distinct names and roles:

Example 4.15.

Marcus (my former self) governed over the kingdom (Me) for many years. He made laws, built cities, fought battles. Marcus always knew he wasn't doing such a good job, but he learned to make do. He fought and fought and fought. He made so many mistakes but he persisted. He never gave up and the kingdom survived and, at times, prospered. Marcus suffered for decades not knowing Kiera existed. Now that she has arrived, she is learning to do things in Marcus’s place. She's a fast learner, but it will take time. There is

so much to learn. Already, the kingdom is seeing more abundance under her direction. Marcus is so tired. He is so happy Kiera is here. Someday in the future, Marcus will be able to permanently step down and just be an advisor, but that day is far in the future. But every day things step closer in that direction.

Temporal splits, have been identified in the literature (e.g., Emmott, 2002; Demjén, 2011; El Refaie, 2019), typically in relation to life before versus after a life-altering injury. However, some trans people may experience temporal splits in a completely distinct way, not as a transformation of the same self over time, but as a succession of different selves. In the above example, the two selves are personified as distinct individuals with different names, likely reflecting the process of transitioning socially, whereby an individual may change their name to better align with their gender identity. The idea that two gender identities equate to two different people is supported by terms used within trans communities, such as “deadname” which is used to refer to the name one was assigned at birth.

Although SPLIT SELF metaphors were relatively infrequent in the current dataset, their presence is significant. They were the second most frequent source domain for transitioning identified in Lederer’s (2015) analysis of coming-out and transition narratives after JOURNEY metaphors. The lower frequency here may reflect differences in focus. Lederer’s (2015) dataset comprised of coming-out stories and transition narratives, whereas the present dataset focuses on metalinguistic threads in which contributors propose metaphors for gender dysphoria. Such metalinguistic threads lend themselves to highly creative metaphor scenarios. Lederer (2015) suggests that trans people make use of DIVIDED SELF metaphors when they feel that their “inner self” does not align with their “exterior” gender presentation (p. 107) – a finding that is equally applicable to the current dataset.

Although the concept of a mind-body split is not new within gender dysphoria research, participant voices provide a more accurate understanding of this experience (Austin et al., 2022). For example, rather than presenting the mind and body as two mutually exclusive but equally valuable aspects of the self, analysis reveals that participants consistently locate the self in the mind and express an overwhelming desire to align the physical body with this true inner self (Austin et al., 2022). Thus, SPLIT SELF metaphors not only convey the felt dissonance between

internal identity and external embodiment but also frame the body itself as a site of alienation, antagonism and, in cases of gender euphoria, reconciliation.

4.6. TECHNOLOGY Metaphors

The TECHNOLOGY domain occurs thirteen times in the dataset. This perhaps reflects the fact that THE MIND IS A COMPUTER and the BODY IS A MACHINE conceptual metaphors are conventional in English (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 1987). For example, linguistic expressions such as “I’m not *functioning* properly today” and “I’m *running out of steam*” are widely used and frame the mind and body as mechanical systems (Semino & Swindlehurst, 1996, p. 151). These existing conceptual frames provide a readily accessible resource for contributors to express their experiences of gender dysphoria in widely used terms. Here, TECHNOLOGY as a source domain is quite broad, encompassing components such as gaming, hardware/software incompatibility, image resolution, and system errors. Across these scenarios, there is a consistent emphasis on the idea of a mismatch or incongruence.

A total of six references to gaming are made, including creating an avatar that does not look like you (n=3), trying to play a game that is lagging (n=2), and being a side character in one’s own life (n=1):

Example 4.16.

Gender dysphoria is the real life equivalent of making an avatar in a video game that looks nothing like you or what you wanted, and you're trying to change it so that it does.

Here the idea of an avatar evokes a sense of distance from one’s physical self. Although the contributor mentions “*making* an avatar” (italics added for emphasis) it seems that they have limited control over how the avatar looks, foregrounding a lack of agency. The following scenario similarly emphasises reduced agency and a sense of disconnection from oneself:

Example 4.17.

Being a side character in my own life

Taken together, these metaphors highlight how gender dysphoria can undermine one's sense of autonomy and control.

Four references are made to having the wrong software for one's hardware. These metaphors frame dysphoria as a mismatch between "software" (the true self or gender identity) and "hardware" (the body or physical appearance), and thus could be considered elaborations of a SPLIT SELF metaphor:

Example 4.18.

If you're Mac software stuck in Windows hardware. You can't change you, the software, so you need to try and change the hardware, outward appearance, you're in to run properly.

This scenario positions the software as more important than hardware – software is equated with the true self, yet hardware represents what others see. This metaphor suggests that the body is a system which can be upgraded or modified, while the mind remains stable. This framing positions medical gender affirmation as a logical solution to this software-hardware incompatibility.

Two posts compare gender dysphoria to living life in low resolution:

Example 4.19.

It's like I was watching a television with bad reception or video with really low resolution all my life. I can see what's going on but it sucks. Then I start taking the right hormones and all of a sudden it is 4k HD and I never knew it was supposed to look like this.

This metaphor frames dysphoria as diminishing one's quality of life and euphoria (or the absence of dysphoria) as being able to see clearly for the first time. This suggests that gender affirmation is a process of increasing clarity that allows people to fully see themselves and the world around them. This framing validates gender dysphoria by presenting it as a barrier to living fully and advocates for medical transition by positioning it as a 'solution'. However, it could be argued

that this metaphor risks reinforcing a pre- and post-transition binary within which the pre-transition self is presented as incomplete or lacking.

Finally, one reference is made to error pop-ups to capture the persistent emotional discomfort caused by gender dysphoria:

Example 4.20.

the general small dysphoric bullshit reminds me so much of error popups that don't close the program but just make you close them all the time. It makes using the program a chore

This metaphor compares dysphoria to a series of constant low-level interruptions that are tolerable in isolation but cumulatively exhausting. The “error popups” may refer to repetitive reminders of one’s dysphoria that make daily life a “chore”.

Overall, TECHNOLOGY metaphors conceptualise dysphoria as a misalignment or malfunction that prevents optimal functioning. By implication, they suggest that dysphoria is something that can be fixed, often through (medical) transition. They typically position transition in binary terms (e.g., blurry versus 4K clarity) which may exclude nonbinary experiences or those who do not seek medical intervention.

These metaphors draw on a conventionalised domain which may particularly resonate with the users of online communities such as Reddit. In addition, the TECHNOLOGY domain allows contributors to capture both the persistent disruption of dysphoria and the possibility of a ‘solution’.

4.7. JOURNEY Metaphors

The JOURNEY source domain is extremely wide-scope and has a very broad range of target domains to which it can be applied, including relationships (e.g., “we’re on two separate paths”), illness (e.g., “she’s on a breast cancer journey”), and life (e.g., “I’m not sure which route to take”) (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). It can be used to talk about any target domain that is

purposive and proceeds through some stages, meaning almost any long-term human activity (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). It is comprised of various components including a Traveller, a Destination, Obstacles, and a Route (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). In Lederer's (2015) investigation of the metaphors used to talk about the transitioning, the JOURNEY source domain was the most frequent, closely followed by the DIVIDED SELF source domain.

In the current dataset, contributors use this domain to talk about gender dysphoria as a journey or movement from one place to another whereby they are the traveller, their end goal or destination is to live without gender dysphoria (typically through medical interventions), and they must overcome obstacles such as accessing gender-affirming treatment and a lack of familial support. There are various scenarios belonging to this domain, such as sleepwalking through life or going on a journey but not knowing when one will reach the desired destination.

The most frequent realisation of this source domains draws from a pebble in shoe scenario, which accounted for six out of the ten JOURNEY metaphors identified.

Example 4.21.

I like to think of it like a pebble in your shoe. Sometimes that pebble is barely noticeable, and you can walk just fine. Others it's big enough to affect you with every step.

Sometimes it's big enough that you can't even stand up, much less walk. That pebble is dysphoria. Other people don't have that pebble in their shoes, and they can't see it when you try to point it out. They just wonder why you walk funny, or why you think walking is a struggle. Doing your best to walk normally with the pebble is like staying closeted, silent pain with every step. Limping with the pebble is like coming out, and acknowledging that you have that pebble that makes you walk different than those without it. Transitioning (in whatever way works for you) is removing that pebble piece by piece. It takes time, but that pebble is eventually so small that there are days you even forget it was there in the first place

This scenario develops the conventional conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY by mapping different types of movement onto different stages of gender transition. For example, “doing your

best to walk normally” is equated with staying closeted and silently coping, while “limping” is likened to coming out and openly acknowledging one’s dysphoria and trans identity. The contributor also notes that “other people don’t have that pebble in their shoes ... they just wonder why you walk funny,” capturing the invisibility of dysphoria to outsiders and the stigma associated with difference from cisnormativity.

This scenario overlaps with the CLOTHING source domain which also includes metaphors of uncomfortable footwear (for example, shoes that are too small or worn on the wrong feet). However, here the primary focus is on the pebble itself and how it impacts movement. In this way, this metaphor could also be considered a realisation of the EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL PAIN conceptual metaphor, with the pain of the pebble equating to the persistent distress of gender dysphoria.

Overall, JOURNEY metaphors allow contributors to situate their experiences within a broader narrative of progress and movement towards a more authentic self. At the same time, these metaphors highlight the presence of obstacles which hinder progress and the unpredictability of when, or if, the desired destination will be reached.

4.8. HANDEDNESS Metaphors

HANDEDNESS metaphors occurred nine times in the dataset. They describe a situation in which a person writes with their dominant hand – this is often specified as the left hand – while others repeatedly tell them to use their non-dominant hand, even though it is much more difficult and uncomfortable to write this way. These metaphors are often used to express the societal pressure to conform to a gender identity with which one does not identify.

Example 4.22.

My metaphor revolves around handedness. Most people are born with one hand working better than the other, we have a preference for it. Our parents may even try to sway us to use one hand over the other. Given time and practice, we may become proficient at using the other hand. But, no matter how hard we try, that one, dominant hand, is the one we always want to use. The same thing applies to being trans. We can become very good at

acting like the gender everyone expects us to be, but no matter how hard we try, it never feels right.

This scenario suggests that one's assigned gender (like one's non-dominant hand) never feels "natural," even if with time and practice, one becomes superficially proficient at performing/using it. The dominant hand, in contrast, represents a gender identity that feels authentic.

These metaphors are based on the historical and cultural stigma left-handed people faced and continue to face. McManus (2003) notes that a bias against left-handers exists in the education system, in the design of equipment, in customs, rituals and beliefs, and even in language. For example, the word "sinister" derives from Latin meaning on the left-hand side, whilst "dexter" from which words such as dexterous and dexterity originate, means on the right side. Similarly, to "have two left feet" is an insult, but to be a "right-hand man" is a positive attribute (El Refaie, 2019, p. 27). It has been proposed that this bias exists because approximately ninety per cent of the population is right-handed, which has led to the right being the "unmarked" concept and the left being the "marked" concept in every known human language, culture, and religion (McManus, 2003). Thus, these scenarios highlight how the rejection of left-handedness mirrors the societal rejection of gender identities that deviate from cisnormativity.

El Refaie (2019) argues that this opposition has an embodied basis: "wherever one looks, on any continent, in any historical period or in any culture, right and left have their symbolic associations and always it is right that is good and left that is bad" (McManus, 2003, p. 29). For example, this left-right symbolism can be observed in religious paintings up until the Renaissance; there is a clear link between the right side (from the figure's point of view) and the godly and manly, and the left side and the worldly and feminine (El Refaie, 2019). Aristotle's *Metaphysics* also associates the left with the odd, female, dark, and bad, and the right with the even, male, light, and good (El Refaie, 2019). Despite its prevalence, this distinction is not acknowledged in traditional CMT accounts, potentially because it does not generate the same systematic clusters of linguistic expressions as the up-down opposition (El Refaie, 2019, p. 27). By evoking this historical and cultural symbolism, HANDEDNESS metaphors provide a comparison for the experience of being trans in a cisnormative society. They highlight the

psychological cost of conformity, the existence of societal stigma, and the sense of inauthenticity that results from being forced to perform a gender identity that does not feel right.

4.9. JOB Metaphors

There were nine JOB metaphors in the dataset, they often drew on the experience of working a job that one despises but cannot leave. The use of this source domain can potentially be explained by a viral video posted by Abigail Thorne, a transgender Youtuber, in which she shares her coming-out story. The video was posted on her channel *PhilosophyTube* (with over 1.66 million subscribers) in 2021 and has over 3.3 million views as of August 2025. In this video, Abigail compares living with gender dysphoria to being forced to work a dead-end job. Four contributors directly reference Thorne’s analogy when introducing their own metaphors, for example "I related to Abigail Thorne's analogy from her coming out video" and "I liked Abigail Thorne's metaphor in her coming-out video". These uses constitute a form of intertextuality, though operating differently from the INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE domain discussed above. Here, contributors are explicitly citing a metaphor circulating within trans media rather than referring to literary, cultural, or fictional references. This demonstrates how metaphors can become conventionalised within a discourse community. See 8.1.3 *Metaphor Shifting* for a further discussion of metaphor re-use.

The scenarios within the JOB domain share broad similarities, though they vary in their level of detail and specificity. Only one of the eight scenarios specifies a particular job type, an airline pilot, while the others remain more general. In several scenarios, the job is described as “prestigious” and the contributor describes being constantly reminded by others how fortunate they should feel to hold such a position. However, this external validation sharply contrasts their lived experience. Despite their best efforts, they are unable to enjoy, or even tolerate, going to work, which becomes a source of extreme distress.

In one of the more elaborate scenarios, the CLOTHING and JOB source domains are combined.

Example 4.23.

Imagine that you have a job you really hate. It's boring and unfulfilling and generally makes you wish you could just stay in bed all day. Now imagine that you also have to wear a really uncomfortable outfit every day to go to this job you despise. The clothes you have to wear are itchy, they don't look good or feel right on your body. So you have to work this shitty job every day, wearing a terrible outfit that makes you consistently uncomfortable. Now imagine that everyone around you insists that the clothes look really good on you and that your awful job is what you were born to do.

Here two sources of discomfort which both involve constraint and restriction, despising one's job and wearing uncomfortable clothing, are combined to convey the emotional distress of gender dysphoria. This adds an embodied dimension to the suffering, making the discomfort not only psychological but also physical.

This example also illustrates broader patterns within the JOB domain. Metaphors drawing from this source domain often centre on obligation and endurance, with little or no agency to change one's circumstances. The prestige attached to the job in some scenarios further intensifies the disconnect between societal perceptions and personal reality, reinforcing feelings of isolation and entrapment. JOB metaphors appear to capture the long-term, cumulative nature of emotional suffering, especially when external pressures prevent individuals from seeking change.

4.10. UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE Metaphors

The UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE domain occurred nine times, it includes metaphors in which gender dysphoria is described as an intrusive or uncomfortable sensation that is unpleasant to one or more of the senses. These metaphors frame dysphoria as a disturbance that is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore, often drawing on sensory experiences that are physically or psychologically overwhelming. Examples include being covered in cotton candy or mud that cannot be washed off, being extremely hot in a room, or being forced to listen incessant drumming or a beeping car alarm. Many of these metaphors foreground external physical discomfort, as in the following example:

Example 4.24.

I came up with a metaphor for dysphoria. Cotton candy. You're entire body is covered in cotton candy, more so in some places than others, and you can't get it off. The showers are far away and hard to get to. It's super sticky and uncomfortable, and every time you touch something, you get reminded of it.

Here, gender dysphoria is conceptualised as a sticky, sugary substance that clings uncomfortably to the body. Cotton candy's sticky texture reflects a stifling, irritating, and claustrophobic experience of dysphoria. The cotton candy is said to cling "more so in some places than others" potentially alluding to specific body parts that cause more intense dysphoria. Relief is possible; the cotton candy can be washed away, but the showers are distant and inaccessible, potentially reflecting the geographical, temporal, and systematic barriers to accessing gender-affirming care. The metaphor captures the way in which dysphoria intrudes upon everyday functioning – every contact with one's environment becomes a reminder. These everyday disruptions link to the concept of dys-appearance where the body is experienced as intrusive and impossible to ignore (Leder, 1990; El Refaie, 2019).

Another metaphor involving the sense of touch is presented below:

Example 4.25.

You know those sequin pillows? The ones that you can flip the sequins up and down on? I told my mother that not being on hrt [hormone replacement therapy] made me feel like someone had scrubbed it up and down and the sequins were facing all sorts of directions but being on hrt was like all the sequins had been smoothed down to face the same direction.

Here, sequins facing in different directions represent the inner chaos and discomfort of gender dysphoria when the contributor does not have access to hormone replacement therapy. This unsettling texture and lack of cohesion may mirror an uncomfortable misalignment between their body and gender identity. In contrast, smooth sequins signify the alignment and relief the contributor feels when their body more closely reflects their gender identity as a result of hormone replacement therapy. Although this metaphor appears highly novel, it is a manifestation

of conventional conceptual metaphors such as EASE IS SMOOTHNESS and DIFFICULTY IS ROUGHNESS (e.g., “*smooth sailing*” versus “a *rough patch*”).

Other metaphors in this category frame gender dysphoria as an internal sensory experience, often auditory:

Example 4.26.

Before pursuing transitioning, it was like listening to an endless, incessant drumming. Sometimes loud, sometimes quiet, but never silent. Now that I'm actively transitioning, the drumbeat is gone.

In this metaphor, gender dysphoria is presented as a constant, internalised disturbance that fluctuates in intensity but is never fully absent. The comparison to a continuous drumbeat which is sometimes loud and sometimes quiet evokes the chronic nature of dysphoria while still allowing for variation in its intensity. Transitioning is equated to silencing this background noise, symbolising an alleviation of psychological distress. This scenario has clear links to the tinnitus scenarios discussed in 7.2 *Tinnitus Metaphors*.

Collectively, UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE metaphors convey both the persistent and the embodied nature of dysphoria. By grounding the experience in familiar sensory disruptions such as stickiness or unbearable noise, these metaphors provide a sense of how dysphoria can impact everyday life. They also highlight how relief (whether through transitioning or other forms of gender affirmation) is often framed as the alleviation of an ongoing sensory overwhelm, therefore highlighting its urgency and necessity.

4.11. VEHICLE Metaphors

There are two types of metaphors belonging to the VEHICLE domain: (1) wrong fuel type (n=5) and (2) wrong vehicle (n=3).

The most common realisation is the wrong fuel scenario, which involves putting petrol in a diesel engine, or vice versa.

Example 4.27.

you have diesel engines and gasoline engines, right? Well, if you have a diesel engine, and you're trying to run it on gasoline; or if you have a gasoline engine and you're trying to run it on diesel; the engine doesn't run very well. It gets problems. And MOST engines come with accurate labels about which kind of fuel they need, so MOST people go around with their cars running fine, but sometimes you get a diesel engine that's labeled as gasoline or a gasoline engine that's labeled as diesel, and no one knows better at first, so it's trying to run with the fuel the label says it should have (to be clear, the fuel in this analogy is estrogen or testosterone, and the engines are brains, and the labels are genitals. Some engines even are missing labels or get both labels or part of one label and part of the other, and then someone has to guess which kind of fuel the engine should be run on, and they don't always get it right). And if the engine was mislabeled, then it causes a lot of problems! It won't run as well as it should, at least, and sometimes it might blow up, or gum up altogether. And the only way to fix the problem is to recognize that your engine isn't running as well as it should, figure out that the problem is the fuel it's trying to run with, and switch the fuel.

This metaphor presents dysphoria as a mechanical malfunction caused by using the “wrong fuel” for the “engine”. The contributor explicitly breaks down the mappings of fuel to hormones, engines to brains, and labels to genitals, highlighting the educational function of the fora. This metaphor frames dysphoria (or, more specifically, having the incorrect hormones) as fixable. Much like the TECHNOLOGY metaphors, it presents the mind-body relationship as a machine whose optimal functioning depends on alignment. Transition, particularly hormone replacement therapy, is positioned as the necessary solution to achieve alignment.

Wrong vehicle scenarios are the other type of scenario belonging to the VEHICLE domain and they typically express the sense of inhabiting a body misaligned with one's identity. Examples include being forced to drive a rental car instead of one's own, owning an “old beaten-up car” while desiring a Ferrari, and driving a motorcycle when one always wanted a car.

Example 4.28.

Imagine one day you take your car to the shop and they tell you it will be a week, so they give you a rental to drive instead. Now while that rental may be nice and do all the things a car should do, it still isn't your car. The buttons aren't in the same place, the seat doesn't feel right, the mirrors feel weird, the color is wrong etc. But to the outside world there's nothing wrong, you just look like a normal person driving a normal car, but you know inside that this isn't your car and that your real car is somewhere sitting in the shop waiting for you.

This scenario highlights the incongruence between internal experience and external appearance, as well as the invisibility of dysphoria to others. Even when the “vehicle” (i.e., the body) appears to function adequately and meets external expectations, it can still feel wrong, emphasising that dysphoria is about a fundamental misalignment between self-perception and embodiment.

The two types of VEHICLE metaphors offer distinct but related framings of gender dysphoria. Wrong fuel metaphors present dysphoria as a mechanical or technical fault with a clear cause and solution, such as “changing fuel” (hormone replacement therapy). Wrong vehicle metaphors focus more on the experience of inhabiting a body that feels unfamiliar or wrong, even if it outwardly functions as expected. Both subtypes draw on widespread understandings of machinery and transportation to offer an accessible way of conceptualising dysphoria which legitimises gender affirmation.

4.12. Source Domain Overview Summary

This section has provided an overview of the most frequent metaphorical source domains in the dataset and demonstrated that gender dysphoria is far from a singular homogenous experience. Rather, it is conceptualised in multiple, sometimes contrasting, ways. Despite this, several key themes span the dataset as contributors: (1) frequently draw on binary contrasts, (2) position transness as marked, and (3) select intersubjectively accessible areas of experience that balance relatability and creativity. These choices appear to be shaped by the aim of communicating a difficult, personal experience to a cisgender audience while simultaneously engaging with trans community members.

Contributors often introduce a binary and position one state as “correct” or comfortable, and another as “incorrect” or painful. For example, within the CLOTHING domain there is clothing that fits versus clothing that does not fit; within the FOOD/DRINK domain there is food that can be consumed safely versus food that is harmful or inedible; and within the HEALTH/ILLNESS domain one can be healthy versus unhealthy. These binaries capture the idea that living as the sex assigned at birth feels fundamentally uncomfortable or wrong, whereas living as one’s gender identity feels comfortable and authentic. In cases of severe dysphoria, the incorrect option is extreme, causing serious harm or pain (e.g., consuming an allergen). Some contributors do however actively resist binary thinking.

Contributors often present being trans as marked and being cis as unmarked. More specifically, transness is often negatively marked. For example, being trans is wearing shoes that rub while being cis is wearing shoes that fit comfortably. This asymmetry could reflect the difficulty of living with gender dysphoria in a world in which being cis is treated as the norm.

Furthermore, contributors tend to select intersubjectively accessible areas of experience, such as clothing, food, and technology which perhaps reflects the overarching educational and explanatory purpose of the posts. The rationale behind the threads is to propose a metaphor that renders an internal, invisible experience externally comprehensible to a cisgender audience while still resonating with trans community members. Contributors also appear to strive for memorability and novelty. As such, familiar domains are often presented in a novel, sometimes implausible, way (for a discussion of how such implausibility can be accounted for using blending theory, see Section 6.1.2). For example, gender dysphoria is compared to wearing an itchy sweater one *cannot* remove. This reflects the competing pressures at play when proposing a metaphor: relatability and creativity. In addition, it reflects that notion that “for a metaphor to be comprehensible, it must, at some point, draw on some shared knowledge, even if this knowledge is highly schematic or abstract” (Littlemore, Turner & Tuck, 2023, p. 9). While the metaphors are highly creative, they are nevertheless broadly accessible.

Despite the above-mentioned cross-domain similarities, there are within-domain differences. For example, within the HEALTH/ILLNESS domain, some metaphors frame dysphoria as temporary and surmountable (e.g., a fever), while others frame it as permanent and inescapable (e.g.,

tinnitus or a chronic illness). This variation reflects differences in individual experiences and may also reflect the contributor's mindset when posting – some metaphors are disempowering, foregrounding a lack of agency whilst others are more agentive and empowering. Austin et al., (2022) note that “gender dysphoria is often erroneously reduced by those in the medical and mental health fields to a singular, static experience (e.g., one either does or does not have gender dysphoria)” (p. 18). This may make it difficult for those experiencing gender dysphoria to name and recognise their experiences. In addition, doctors, clinicians, and/or the parents of trans people may dismiss or downplay experiences of gender dysphoria that differ in persistence and severity, creating additional barriers to accessing gender-affirming care (Austin et al., 2022). This analysis has demonstrated the heterogeneity of gender dysphoria. These insights have significant implications for providing more nuanced understandings of gender dysphoria.

The following three chapters will explore the three most frequent source domains, CLOTHING, FOOD/DRINK, and HEALTH/ILLNESS in more detail, before considering how contributors evaluate metaphors through endorsement and resistance.

Chapter 5: CLOTHING Metaphors¹⁸

CLOTHING is the most frequently used source domain in the dataset with forty occurrences. This is particularly interesting given that clothing is often considered to be a means of expressing the self and/or identity more generally (Sennett, 2003; Shilling, 2003; Strübel et al., 2022). Clothing is a key site for the performance of gender (Butler, 1990) and clothing is a factor used to make assumptions about gender (Bettcher, 2007).

Two main themes underlie the CLOTHING metaphors – clothes-related discomfort and concealment. The first of the two themes, discomfort, comprises scenarios in which an individual describes an item of clothing which is unpleasant to wear. Oftentimes, the discomfort felt is physical, but in some cases it can be emotional or psychological. The second theme found under the CLOTHING source domain is that of concealment which includes scenarios depicting the true self as hidden or obscured by an item of clothing, typically a costume. The posters of CLOTHING metaphors that focus on concealment often express a sense of frustration as they are perceived and treated as the costume they are wearing rather than the true self which is hidden.

Table 9. Categories of CLOTHING Metaphors

Category	Sub-category	Example Scenario(s)	Frequency
Discomfort	Ill-fitting	Wearing ill-fitting shoes, underwear, or formalwear	15
Discomfort	Worn incorrectly	Wearing one's shoes on the wrong feet; wearing one's shirt inside out	11
Discomfort	Unpleasant physical sensation	Wearing an itchy sweater, wet clothes, or dirty clothes	6
Concealment	Identity concealed by clothing	Wearing a costume or mask	8

¹⁸ This chapter has been edited for a book chapter that is pending publication.

5.1. Discomfort Clothing Metaphors

Discomfort clothing metaphors describe an item of clothing which is uncomfortable to wear. The scenarios differ in terms of the item of clothing discussed and/or the way in which it causes discomfort. A clothing item can cause discomfort because it is (i) worn incorrectly (e.g., wearing one's shoes on the wrong feet), (ii) ill-fitting (e.g., it is too small), or (iii) has an unpleasant physical sensation (e.g., it is itchy or wet). Oftentimes, the discomfort manifests as physical pain, but in some cases the discomfort felt is emotional. For example, an individual may feel self-conscious, anxious or ashamed as a result of wearing a particular clothing item.

5.1.1. Ill-fitting Clothing Metaphors

Ill-fitting clothing metaphors describe clothing which is too tight or too small, hence restricting the wearer, causing them to feel trapped. One contributor compares the discomfort caused by their gender dysphoria to wearing ill-fitting shoes which hurt their feet and leave blisters:

My story was about shoes. To me it was like having ill fitting shoes. But they were your shoes. You always had those shoes they fit how they fit and just assumed that everyone else's shoes fit the same way. You were none the wiser that others had different shoes. Then you get to try on someone different shoes and they fit so much better. You're like Wow! I can have these shoes and you realize you're not stuck with the horrible shoes where your toe sticks out and leaves blisters everywhere. So you get the new shoes and suddenly your feet don't hurt and your posture is better and you feel great.

In this metaphor different pairs of shoes map onto different gender identities; the original pair of ill-fitting shoes appear to correspond to the contributor's assigned sex at birth, and different shoes correspond to different gender identities. When the contributor tries on different shoes that fit well, they are potentially affirming their gender.

The contributor describes how they initially normalised their discomfort; it is only through trying on a different pair of shoes (i.e., experimenting with/affirming their gender identity) that they could truly recognise it. They emphasise how they believed others lived with similar levels of discomfort as they state that they "were none the wiser that others had different shoes". On the

one hand, this could reflect that the contributor was unaware that that some people have shoes that are comfortable – that is, some people are comfortable with their gender identity and it does not cause feelings of discomfort. On the other hand, this comparison could reflect how the contributor was initially unaware that shoes could be different – that is, how gender can be fluid and changeable. They internalise their discomfort because they do not realise that there are other options. This metaphor seemingly speaks to cisnormativity, the pervasive assumption that those assigned female at birth grow up to be women and those assigned male at birth grow up to be men (Bauer et al., 2009), which perpetuates the belief that gender is assigned and unchangeable.

The contributor documents the moment of realisation when they find their perfect pair of shoes (a gender-affirming identity) when they state, “You’re like wow I can have these shoes”. This exclamation captures a sense of surprise as they realise that much like shoes, gender can be changed. This again speaks to hegemonic discourses that perpetuate the belief that gender identity and biological sex should align (Cooper et al., 2020). The exclamation also captures feelings of relief and gender-euphoria as the contributor begins to wear the shoes that are right for them and thus live authentically. The act of changing shoes may allude to transitioning whether that is socially, legally, medically or any other way.

This metaphor touches on themes such as the normalisation of discomfort and the difficulties of living in a cisnormative society, but it also foregrounds liberation and agency. This metaphor is not simply about pain and discomfort, but also confidence and self-esteem. When the contributor affirms their gender identity “[their] entire posture is better” which may allude a new-found sense of self-assurance as upright posture has symbolic links to confidence (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This demonstrates the significant impact gender affirmation can have upon the body and one’s self perception.

A second metaphor which falls under this category compares dysphoria to wearing an ill-fitting glove:

it’s like a glove that’s the wrong size for the hand we’re trying to put it on. To onlookers it looks like a glove, and moves like a glove should, but to the one wearing it, it is

uncomfortable. For some of us, it is unbearably so. This is why transgender people often transition rather than, “tough it out” or, “get over it”. No amount of positive thinking, toughness, or prayer will make that glove the right size, and the thought that one should change the hand is even less productive. (one doesn’t cut off a finger to make a too-small glove fit!) The only solution for most of us is to find a better glove. That is, to find a gender expression that fits our gender identity.

This scenario expresses a similar idea to the above ill-fitting shoe scenario. The clothing item, in this case a glove, corresponds to gender expression and by implication the wearer’s hand corresponds to gender identity. The contributor states that the glove they initially wear is “uncomfortable”, suggesting that they experience discomfort when trying to live as their birth assigned sex. Again, much like the previous example, the contributor initially tries to wear the wrong option for them, as they force themselves to fit into something that simply was not made for them.

The metaphor alludes to different degrees of gender dysphoria, as the contributor notes that for some people the discomfort is unbearable. This suggests that some individuals may be able to continue wearing the glove despite the discomfort it causes, whereas this may not be possible for others. The metaphor also captures the invisibility of gender dysphoria as the contributor notes that to onlookers “it looks like a glove, and moves like a glove should”, suggesting that others may be completely unaware of a person’s internal struggle.

This post has an argumentative function as it explains why trans people transition. The contributor notes that “no amount of positive thinking, toughness, or prayer will make that glove the right size” in which the tricolon of abstract nouns “thinking”, “toughness”, and “prayer” could reflect common arguments presented against transitioning. The metaphor hints at a societal expectation that trans people should suppress, deny or manage their gender dysphoria for the comfort of others. Trans and gender diverse (TGD) people often engage in emotional labour when navigating cisnormative social systems (Rood et al., 2017; Puckett et al., 2023; Goffnet et al., 2024). For example, Goffnet et al., (2024) found that TGD people feel the need to engage in emotion work to maintain comfort and harmony in social interactions often at the expense of

their authentic identity expression and psychosocial wellbeing. This includes concealing their identity and simulating cisgenderness for the comfort of others and their own safety (Goffnet et al., 2024).

The contributor directly rebuts transphobic arguments against transitioning through the idea of “[cutting] off a finger to make a too-small glove fit”. This demonstrates how extreme and nonsensical transphobic arguments are and exposes the harm caused by forcing oneself to live inauthentically. Like many of the metaphors within the dataset, this metaphor ends with an explicit breakdown of metaphorical mappings in which the contributor notes that the glove corresponds to gender expression. This reflects the overarching didactic function of the threads.

5.1.2. Clothing Worn Incorrectly Metaphors

As evidenced in the above analyses, clothing can cause physical discomfort if it is ill-fitting, it can also cause discomfort if it is worn incorrectly. For example, one contributor describes wearing their shoes on the wrong feet:

One that came across a few years back was wearing your left shoe on your right foot and right shoe on your left foot... you might be able to walk like that for a mile, but to walk for 50 miles would be unbearable.

At the highest-level of generality, this metaphor could be considered a realisation of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor, in which the poster of this metaphor is a traveller. They are undertaking a journey which is made difficult as they are walking with their shoes on the wrong feet, a difficulty which seems to correspond to the discomfort caused by living with gender dysphoria. Within this metaphor, and the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor more broadly, distances equate to periods of time, with longer distances equating to longer periods of time. Thus, through introducing the distances of ‘a mile’ versus ‘50 miles’, the contributor is able to suggest that the effects of gender dysphoria are exacerbated over time; walking for one mile with shoes on the wrong feet, or living with dysphoria for a short period of time, may be painful yet manageable; walking with shoes on the wrong feet for 50 miles, or living with dysphoria for an extended period of time, is unbearable. Thus, stressing the urgency they feel to affirm their

gender identity. Furthermore, walking with one's shoes on the wrong feet for extended periods of time has damaging consequences for one's health, potentially allowing the contributor to suggest that living with gender dysphoria has similarly serious and lasting impacts on an individual's well-being.

In this scenario, pain is alleviated by wearing one's shoes on the correct feet. An entailment of this metaphor is that gender dysphoria may similarly be eased or resolved through the affirmation of one's gender identity. Switching one's shoes can be solved easily and quickly, whereas this is often not the case for gender dysphoria. This demonstrates a potential limitation of the CLOTHING source domain as it does not capture, and therefore backgrounds, the often lengthy and difficult process of transitioning. However, this metaphor allows the contributor to capture and foreground the pain and discomfort their dysphoria causes, and how this impacts them throughout their daily life.

5.1.3. Unpleasant Physical Sensation Clothing Metaphors

A clothing item may also cause discomfort due to its sensation on the skin. One contributor compares gender dysphoria to wearing an itchy sweater:

I use receiving a sweater as a gift. You feel obligated to wear it because it was a gift, but it's itchy, it doesn't fit quite right so it pulls in a weird uncomfortable way, and the tag scratched up your neck. At some point you have to come to terms with taking the sweater off.

In this scenario, wearing the sweater causes unbearable discomfort which appears to correspond to the discomfort the contributor feels when living as or being perceived as their birth assigned sex. Much like the previous examples, the emotional discomfort of gender dysphoria is represented in terms of physical pain. This allows a complex, abstract experience to be understood in terms of something more familiar and physical. The contributor discusses different types of embodied discomfort to describe their dysphoria including itching, pulling and scratching.

The contributor introduces a gift component; the sweater was a gift which makes them feel obligated to wear it. It could be argued that gifts come with expectations of gratitude which may lead to feelings of obligation or even guilt if the gift is unwanted. This may reflect the expectation or obligation in cisnormative settings to perform a gender that matches one's assigned sex at birth. The contributor implies that they are not choosing to wear the sweater (or live as the gender they were socialised), rather, they are wearing it to meet expectations and avoid disappointing their family. The fear of familial rejection after sharing one's gender identity is common among trans people (Pearce, 2018; Cooper et al., 2020).

The contributor notes that eventually wearing the sweater will become so uncomfortable that they will have no choice but to remove it. Here, "taking the sweater off" corresponds to affirming their gender identity. This highlights the cumulative effect of gender dysphoria which intensifies over time, a theme which underlies many of the metaphors in the dataset. The contributor states that they must "[come] to terms with" removing the sweater which alludes to the potentially lengthy and difficult process of self-acceptance and disclosure. Thus, this metaphor is not only about feelings of physical discomfort, but also anxieties around coming out and transitioning. The common experience of receiving an unwanted gift is used to articulate a deeply complex internal experience. Interestingly, this metaphor considers the perspective of, and allows empathy for, both the recipient of the gift and the givers.

In their study on emotion work among transgender and gender diverse people, Goffnet et al., (2024) noted the use of an itchy sweater metaphor by a participant named Leo. Leo used the metaphor to describe the long-term impact of repeatedly performing emotion work:

Because it's a thing where it's like just a little bit, and it's not that bad when you put it on but you wear it for too long of a time, eventually you're just like I have to take the sweater off—this is going to kill me, like I can't wear this anymore. And that's kind of what it is, it like it builds up over time so it's like a progressive thing, like one [time] might not hurt you that much, but then the next time, and the next time and the next time, and then if you have to correct somebody. And then, when they do it again and it's worse

because you already corrected them and, like how many times are you gonna correct them? (Goffnet et al., 2024, p. 556)

Leo's account shares several similarities with the contributor's metaphor. Firstly, both frame discomfort as cumulative, emphasising that it builds gradually and intensifies over time. Furthermore, both metaphors involve a threshold at which the discomfort becomes unbearable, prompting decisive action, namely removing the sweater. These metaphors are applied to different contexts, gender dysphoria in the contributor's case and emotion work in Leo's (specifically, being misgendered or addressed with incorrect pronouns). This suggests that the itchy sweater scenario may function as a more general metaphor for describing experiences which involve gradually intensifying emotional or psychological strain.

5.1.4. Emotional Discomfort Clothing Metaphors

In the majority of CLOTHING metaphors, the clothing is a direct cause of physical pain or discomfort. However, in some scenarios the discomfort is emotional rather than physical, as the clothing functions as a vehicle for expressing feelings of shame or anxiety. This is the case in the following scenario, in which one contributor compares gender dysphoria to being forced to wear dirty clothes to work:

All of your clothes are dirty, but you have to go to work and you don't have time to do laundry. You have to dig through your laundry basket trying to find the least disgusting pieces of dirty clothing to wear. As soon as you leave the house, you feel immediately self-conscious. Even if no one else knows that you are wearing dirty clothing, you know, and it makes you feel disgusting. Even if good things happen at work, its hard for you to enjoy them. You wish that you could avoid your co-workers. You just want to be seen by as few people as possible and go home as quickly as possible. Except that in this analogy, the "dirty clothes" are your own body.

Our clothes (and our bodies) are typically backgrounded in everyday life and functioning. However, we may pay increased attention to our clothing if it is dirty, stained or wet, in the same way that we may pay increased attention to our body if we experience it as 'problematic' or

‘wrong’ (El Refaie, 2014, 2019). This seems to be the case in the above scenario. Unlike previous scenarios in which the clothing is a source of discomfort but is distinct from the body, here, the clothing stands for the body itself. The dirty clothing thus operates metonymically as it represents the body through a part-whole relationship — the part (the dirty clothing) is used to symbolise the whole (the body).

The clothes being “dirty” indicate a negative perception of one’s body. Body dysphoria frequently involves distress associated with the dissonance between assigned and experienced gender, which may manifest as feelings of unease, disgust, or shame (Cooper et al., 2020). In the dirty clothes scenario, gender dysphoria is experienced as a form of dys-appearance (Leder, 1990) as the body enters the perceptual field as a source of discomfort. The contributor states that their body makes them feel “self-conscious” thus it is not a backgrounded vehicle for perception but a foregrounded object within their consciousness. The impact of this is significant; it affects their daily functioning, ultimately leading to hyper-self-consciousness and withdrawal.

The contributor suggests that they feel ashamed of their body both in private and in public, emphasising how feelings of dysphoria are inescapable. The metaphor also touches on social dysphoria as feelings of dysphoria are exacerbated in public. This aligns with research showing that trans people frequently report heightened anxiety when in public spaces (Cooper et al., 2020). Dysphoria impacts the contributor’s ability to fully engage with life as it seems to override positive moments, “even if good things happen” it is difficult to enjoy them. This demonstrates that dysphoria is not only a form of distress caused by an incongruence between assigned and experienced gender, as defined in diagnostic manuals, it is also a form of distress caused by societal stigma and external pressures (Cooper et al., 2020).

Conceptualising the body in terms of clothing is not uncommon in trans discourses. Prosser (1998) notes that trans people may view the material body as a garment and writes that transition via surgery is not a mere change of clothing but a shedding of the garment, an act which “strips the body bare to what it should have been” (p. 83). In this sense, the metonymic relationship between clothing and the body may also reflect broader processes of embodiment and becoming.

5.2. Concealment Clothing Metaphors

This section will explore the Concealment clothing metaphors identified in the dataset.

Concealment clothing metaphors describe contributors wearing a costume or mask which obscures the true self. This leads to feelings of frustration they are treated as the covering they are wearing rather than their true self. Concealment clothing metaphors also touch on feelings of social dysphoria as they emphasise a dissonance between self-perception and social perception. Concealment clothing metaphors are a form of SPLIT SELF metaphor. Lakoff (1996) proposed that every person is comprised of two parts: a ‘subject’ and a ‘self’. The subject (one’s inner self) is the locus of consciousness and subjectivity, whilst the self (one’s outer self) is one’s body and physical characteristics (Lakoff, 1996). The notion of the self as split occurs within various source domains throughout the dataset, but it is particularly applicable to the CLOTHING source domain.

Lederer’s (2015) study investigated the metaphors trans people use to talk about the transition process in a corpus of transgender ‘coming-out’ narratives and found that they may experience themselves as split in two ways. Firstly, some people may feel as though their physical appearance, or outer self, does not align with their true inner self (Lederer, 2015). Alternatively, others may experience their body as split “between two genders” when they are in the process of transitioning (Lederer, 2015, p. 107). This may be the case with individuals who have begun hormone therapy but possess some of their biological sex characteristics for example. The former category, mind-body splits, occur in the Concealment clothing metaphors.

Mind-body split metaphors are manifestations of the container image schema as the inner self (one’s mind) is considered to be inside the outer self (one’s body). Although the true self is often considered to be the inner self, in the current image-based society the self is no longer regarded as simply being contained within the body, it “emerges in a fully interactive process in which the container and the contained have an inseparable, invariant relationship; not simply as residences for selves, but as alterable signs of the self” (Edgley, 2006, p. 242). Thus, the body is increasingly coming to be regarded as the true self. This links to the fact that we often make assumptions about someone’s gender based on what we can see (e.g., their clothing, physical

features and behaviours) (cf. KNOWING IS SEEING conceptual metaphor) which can be a source of anxiety and/or frustration amongst TGD people.

Such feelings are evidenced in the Concealment clothing metaphors. For example, one contributor describes a costume scenario:

I always say “imagine being in a costume that you can’t take off and nobody believes your wearing”

Here, the costume seems to correspond to a body, role or a gender identity that one does not identify with. This scenario captures the idea that the true inner self is hidden by the costume, yet people cannot see beyond it. In this scenario, and nine other CLOTHING metaphors in the dataset, the contributor explicitly states that the clothing item *cannot* be removed. Such scenarios are implausible; in reality a costume can easily be removed, but in this scenario it cannot. This allows the contributor to express a sense of entrapment, seemingly within their own body, foregrounding a sense of powerlessness and a lack of agency.

In cisnormative contexts, the body is often considered a direct reflection of the 'true' self, which serves to intensify feelings of entrapment for those whose gender identity is not affirmed, compounding the distress caused by a lack of societal acceptance. Thus, this scenario also seems to address societal and cultural disbelief of trans identities. The contributor notes that “nobody believes” they are wearing a costume which could potentially reflect that some people are sceptical of their identity.

Some of the costume scenarios within the dataset are more elaborate, as a specific type of costume is mentioned. In the dataset, there are references to a police officer costume, a gorilla costume, and an inflatable dinosaur costume. The police officer costume scenario is presented below.

Imagine you go to a costume party dressed as a police officer. You get to the party and start trying to mix in. Eventually the real police turn up to shut the party down and are

glad you are already on site to assist. You realise it's illegal to impersonate a police officer so you kind of go with it, hoping to quickly get changes when no one is looking. Next thing you know you've been on the force for 29 years, they are about to give you a gold watch and everything. You can't handle living this lie anymore and really just want to have the life you were supposed to have; but your terrified because now you have been impersonating a police officer for an entire career and surely they will lock you up and throw the key away. You wish you just went to the party as a slutty cat like every other girl in 2004...

This scenario is detailed and comprises various settings and participants. The contributor initially describes entering a costume party being dressed as a police officer. However, the 'real police' turn up and shut the costume party down. This notion of 'real' versus 'fake' police officers could capture the idea that the contributor may not feel like a 'real' member of the sex they were assigned at birth. The contributor describes how they continue impersonating a police officer even though they do not want to do so. This seems to capture how they try their best to live as the sex they were assigned at birth even though this is challenging and uncomfortable. They later "realise it's illegal to impersonate a police officer" which suggests that if their 'fake' status as a police officer was revealed, they would face severe consequences. This potentially captures the danger and fear the contributor feels towards disclosing their trans identity.

This has clear links to how trans and gender nonconforming people often feel the need to conceal their identity in social contexts for reasons of personal safety and to avoid stigma and victimization (Rood et al., 2017). Identity concealment, which can include concealing one's transgender identity and not taking steps to affirm one's gender, is a significant source of distress, guilt and shame (Rood et al., 2017; Bockting et al., 2020; Cooper et al., 2020). However, concealment is not always a stigmatizing experience. Rood et al., (2017) note that while concealment carries connotations of hiding or masking it can be a form of self-affirmation. Some TGD people may conceal their gender history or assigned physical body as they feel it does not reflect their true gender identity. In this context, concealment is perceived as an act of self-empowerment and self-respect. This is not the case in the current scenario in which it is the true gender identity which is being hidden.

The contributor describes how time passes, and the next the next they know they've "been on the force for 29 years" (i.e., living as their birth assigned sex). Towards the end of the scenario the contributor expresses a wish that they had affirmed their gender sooner "you wish you just went to the party as a slutty cat like every other girl in 2004". Although this has a light-hearted, humorous tone, it conveys a significant message. It is telling that the contributor feels being a "fake" cis person (or police officer) is more socially acceptable than being a "real" trans person (or cat). This framing in which trans existence is positioned as inherently deceptive or 'illegal' reflects the stigma faced by trans people. Much like within the other scenarios, the idea of a 'right' and 'wrong' option is introduced. In this case the wrong option for the individual is the police officer costume and the right option is a cat costume.

5.2.1. Mask Metaphors

The majority of Concealment clothing metaphors describe a costume which hides the true self, however in two cases the true self is obscured by a mask. Although mask scenarios could be subsumed under an alternate source domain such as SECRET IDENTITY, the decision was made to categorise them under the CLOTHING source domain as they describe a physical covering which obscures the true self. In addition, they are closely related to the costume scenarios. In both of the mask scenarios, a specific type of mask is not stated. One of the scenarios is presented below.

For me, being trans feels like wearing a mask. Constantly. All the time. Every day. And you physically can't ever take it off. You know that what you see in the mirror and what other people see when they look at you aren't the same as what you actually look like, and it hurts to have people comment on how you look when you know they're just seeing the mask that isn't your real face. There are surgeries to make the mask look more like your real face, but you're still wearing the mask. You'll never truly take it off. When other people touch your face, it feels muted, and far away, distant. You can feel it but it's still through the mask. Sometimes you'd rather just cut the mask off your own face rather than keep living while wearing it. But sometimes, after you've had all these surgeries and

procedures to make your mask look like your true face, you look in the mirror and you can be happy that at least when you smile, the mask does too.

In this scenario, the contributor expresses feelings of sadness, frustration and numbness towards wearing a mask that they cannot remove. The mask seems to map onto their externally perceived body or gender presentation which does not align with their internal identity. The mask conceals their gender identity, capturing a misalignment between the inner self and outer self. The mask cannot be removed, the contributor is forced to wear it “Constantly, All the time. Everyday.” foregrounding the permanence and involuntariness of the misalignment.

The mask dulls genuine connection – the contributor notes that when others comment on their appearance they are not commenting on their ‘true face’ but the mask. Similarly, when others touch the mask, their touch feels muted. This suggests a sense of disconnect and/or alienation from their own body. The mask is perceived as an entity distinct from the self. The metaphor presents an altered or distorted sense of physicality as the contributor does not experience their body as their own. Thus, unlike previous scenarios which describe embodied experience in terms of acute physical pain (e.g., wearing shoes that rub) or discomfort (e.g., wearing an itchy sweater) in this scenario gender dysphoria is described as a form of numbness, emphasizing an absence rather than an intensity of feeling. The mask dys-appears; it is not experienced as a neutral backgrounded vehicle for perception but an intrusive barrier that dulls and distorts all forms of social and physical connection.

The contributor decides to alter the mask via surgical procedures such that it more closely aligns with the true self. Although completely removing the mask is impossible the contributor suggests that they are able to achieve some relief through surgery. They frame medical transition as an act of becoming or alignment suggesting it is not a method of creating a new self but revealing the true self. The scenario ends on a bittersweet note as the contributor implies that while medical transition has alleviated some aspects of their dysphoria, it did not achieve a complete resolution as the mask remains. This suggests that while their physical appearance now better reflects their self-image, total embodiment has not been achieved. Notably, the mask smiles in alignment with the true self which offers a sense of hope for the future.

5.3. CLOTHING Metaphor Summary

CLOTHING metaphors for gender dysphoria rely on familiar embodied experiences to articulate feelings of physical and emotional discomfort. Complex subjective lived experiences of gender dysphoria are conceptualised through widely shared embodied experiences, such as wearing ill-fitting shoes or a costume, allowing the posters to achieve their communicative goal of making gender dysphoria intelligible to cisgender audiences. The relatability of these experiences could serve to ‘demystify’ trans experiences by mapping them onto mundane everyday struggles. Thus, they offer a different perspective from problematic media narratives in which trans experiences are portrayed as exotic¹⁹ or other. Yet in many of the scenarios contain a slightly implausible element, potentially to suggest that cis people may never be able to fully relate.

In many of the scenarios there is an idea that something is uncomfortable or incorrect and it therefore must be made comfortable or corrected, i.e., the dirty clothing must be washed, the shoes must be worn correctly, or the costume must be removed. This presents transitioning as an act of becoming comfortable or correct. Through presenting assigned sex at birth/assigned gender roles as ‘ill-fitting’ or ‘uncomfortable’, these metaphors challenge cisnormative assumptions and expose cis privilege which is being comfortable in one’s gender unnoticed. Although the metaphors focus overwhelmingly on gender dysphoria, many also touch on gender euphoria. If gender dysphoria is wearing an itchy sweater, by implication, gender euphoria is removing it. Transitioning is not explicitly mentioned in all of the scenarios though it is implied, which allows the reader to determine what transition means to them.

It is interesting that the CLOTHING metaphors are not particularly gendered given that clothing is largely considered a site for performing gender (e.g., Butler, 1990). For trans people, clothing can be a source of distress and discomfort or authenticity and euphoria (e.g., Cooper et al., 2020). Clothing is often viewed as a significant, yet accessible first step in the transition process which

¹⁹ There have been efforts to counter this exoticisation. For example, The Museum of Transology in the UK aims to "de-spectacularize" transgender lives, by showcasing everyday objects and personal stories, to present trans lives as ordinary and relatable.

socially affirms one's gender identity and enhances feelings of congruence regarding one's gender identity and outwards physical appearance (Strübel et al., 2022). Compared to cis people, trans people may rely more on clothing to change their appearance to "better approximate societal expectations of what it means to look feminine or masculine and to negotiate the disparity between their perceived and ideal gendered selves" (Strübel et al., 2022, p. 3). Interestingly, there is an absence of gender in the metaphors for gender dysphoria; the metaphors focus more on deep rooted feelings of embodied discomfort.

The argument could be made that some scenarios contain gendered elements. For example, wearing ill-fitting shoes is perhaps more akin to a feminized experience than a masculinized one. The Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists found that thirty-seven per cent of women would wear uncomfortable shoes as long as they were fashionable (BBC News, 2009). It is widely known that the fashion industry prioritizes appearance over comfort in women's footwear. Menz and Morris (2005) found that women wear shoes that are shorter, narrower and have a reduced total area compared to their feet than men.

The police officer costume scenario could also be read through a gendered lens. It is likely that a cat costume would more commonly be associated with femininity than a police officer costume. Particularly as the contributor stresses that they wish they "went to the party as a slutty cat like every other girl in 2004...". Nevertheless, it is interesting that CLOTHING metaphors for gender dysphoria often avoid the gender binary that is so often performed and perceived through clothing.

The analysis of CLOTHING metaphors for gender dysphoria contributes to a better understanding of trans lived experiences and subjectivities. It has been demonstrated that near-universal experiences of wearing clothing can be used to express complex experiences of emotional and psychological distress. Different types of dysphoria are evidenced through the metaphors, including both bodily and social dysphoria. Thus, this analysis challenges and expands conceptions of gender dysphoria as defined by healthcare providers and found in diagnostic manuals. In addition, it is interesting that gender dysphoria is metaphorically conceptualised

beyond gender – that is, metaphorical descriptions of gender dysphoria are not explicitly gendered.

CLOTHING has a long history as a source domain for talking about gender and the body, particularly in relation to trans identities. Trans scholar Jay Prosser (1998), for example, notes that trans people “[change] sexed parts of the body like a set of clothes” (p. 62) and “the bodily frame is thought of as another article of clothing” (p. 63). More recently, Goffnet et al., (2024) document the use of an itchy-sweater metaphor in accounts of emotion work among trans and gender diverse individuals, further illustrating the use of CLOTHING metaphors in trans narratives.

Thus, CLOTHING appears to be a relatively conventional source domain in relation to trans lived experiences, and it is much more conventional than many of the other source domains identified in the threads. Nevertheless, as shown in the analysis, contributors often creatively extend this source domain. Here, creativity does not arise from selecting an unusual source domain but from introducing implausible or exaggerated elements into a familiar domain. These include scenarios in which clothing cannot be removed or no one can tell that one is wearing it. These creative extensions allow contributors to express nuances of dysphoria that may be difficult to articulate literally, while still retaining the accessibility and relatability of a conventional domain. Overall, this demonstrates how even conventional or familiar domains can be adapted in novel ways to capture the complex, almost ineffable, dimensions of gender dysphoria.

Chapter 6: FOOD/DRINK Metaphors

This chapter examines how the FOOD/DRINK source domain is used to conceptualise gender dysphoria. It is the second most frequent source domain in the dataset, with twenty-four occurrences. As outlined in the Data and Methodology, scenarios within a source domain can, where relevant, be grouped into subcategories to capture recurring patterns. Within the FOOD/DRINK domain, two broad subcategories emerged.

The first includes scenarios in which multiple food or drink options are available, but the trans person either receives or selects the wrong one. In some cases, they are aware of this immediately but oftentimes they realise later that what they have been given is not suitable for them. These metaphors will be referred to as Either/Or food/drink metaphors (n=19).

The second subcategory involves scenarios in which a trans person compares themselves to a food or drink item with incongruent packaging, where the external presentation does not match the internal product. These will be referred to as Internal/External food/drink metaphors (n=5). This section explores each subcategory in turn, considering their different linguistic manifestations and exploring how they frame the experience of gender dysphoria.

6.1. Either/Or Food/Drink Metaphors

There are three subtypes of the Either/Or metaphors, all of which involve an individual being allocated or selecting from (typically) two food/drink options. While these metaphors have varied linguistic manifestations, they share the central notion that one option is more suitable or desirable than the other and it often takes time for the individual to recognise that their initial option is not the most suitable for them. The three subtypes of Either/Or metaphor are as follows:

- (1) Metaphors in which one option is not suitable for human consumption (n=5).
- (2) Metaphors in which all options are suitable for human consumption but not for the individual under discussion, i.e., due to an allergy or intolerance (n=4).
- (3) Metaphors in which all options are suitable for human consumption, but one option is preferred over the others (n=10).

6.1.1. Either/Or Metaphors - Unsuitable for Human Consumption

Every Either/Or food/drink metaphor belonging to the ‘unsuitable for human consumption’ subcategory involves a saltwater scenario. In these scenarios, a trans person is unknowingly served saltwater, typically in a restaurant setting, while everyone else at the table receives freshwater. As the two drinks appear identical, the discrepancy goes unnoticed by others and often initially by the trans person themselves. They may sense that something is not right, but they cannot immediately identify what is wrong and why they are not enjoying their drink like everyone else. In this mapping, those given saltwater represent people who experience gender dysphoria, while those given freshwater represent those who do not.

The saltwater scenario occurs five times in the dataset. Each scenario varies in terms of its level of complexity; some contributions are much more elaborate than others, with posts ranging from 47 to 630 words. Notably each instantiation of this scenario is posted in a different thread, suggesting that its recurrence cannot straightforwardly be explained by users reacting to the same initial post. However, two contributors explicitly acknowledge that their analogy is inspired by something they have previously read (e.g., “A good analogy I saw once before compared gender dysphoria to water” and “So, i once read this analogy for dysphoria, and I figured i’d share it with y’all (Sorry to the person i stole it from, but i dont remember your username)”). This suggests that community members actively engage with multiple threads in these subreddits and reuse metaphors that resonate.

One realisation of a saltwater scenario is illustrated below:

So, imagine you’re in a restaurant. Everyone there is being served water, but you somehow keep getting salt water in the process. Of course, it doesn’t look any different, but it tastes awful and literally dries you out. But you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, because you only have your salt water to compare it to. Anytime you complain you’re thirsty, which is due to the water being salty, you get told to have some more, even though it is literally the root cause of your problems. But you don’t realize this. Everyone else is just fine, so clearly, the problem must be with you. It is only when

you get to try someone else's water that you realize the source of the problem had never been you all along.

Across the dataset, saltwater scenarios consistently involve “identical-looking glasses”, which allude to the invisibility of dysphoria. While others easily “gulp down” their water, the trans person drinks the saltwater and is left feeling “nauseous” questioning whether “there's something wrong [with them]”. They recognise that something is amiss and uncomfortable but lack an evident external cause, which causes internal conflict and self-doubt. The scenario also captures an outsider's perspective; saltwater and freshwater appear identical, therefore others cannot see a legitimate grounds for distress and may treat the discomfort as imagined or exaggerated. This potentially captures how those without gender dysphoria may struggle to recognise its validity since nothing appears visibly ‘wrong’ with the individual, in the same way that nothing appears ‘wrong’ with the beverage they have been given.

Within this scenario, thirst is mapped onto dysphoric feelings, with increasing levels of thirst equating to more intense dysphoria. Although thirst is not conventionally used to talk about difficult experiences in English, it is an intersubjectively accessible experience of bodily distress. However, the metaphor does more than evoke discomfort – drinking saltwater causes dehydration, which when mapped onto the target domain of gender dysphoria, positions it as similarly detrimental to one's health. It is universally recognised that dehydration needs to be remedied before serious health risks occur, and by extension, this metaphor frames dysphoria as a condition that must be taken seriously to avoid life-threatening consequences. In this framing, continued consumption of the saltwater despite its risks parallels the dangers of leaving dysphoria untreated, emphasising an urgent need for intervention.

Saltwater is not only harmful to consume, but it also has an extremely unpleasant taste, emphasising the unpleasant, distressing nature of gender dysphoria. When individuals try their best to consume the saltwater despite its repulsive taste, they are potentially attempting to suppress their dysphoric feelings and live as their assigned sex at birth – an effort that is framed as difficult and unsustainable.

These scenarios also depict a moment of realisation or clarity. Typically, the contributor realises “that the problem isn’t [theirs]” after trying someone else’s water. This realisation arguably mirrors the moment trans people encounter gender diversity, meet other trans people, or learn about gender-affirming care. Therefore, the metaphor demonstrates how exposure to alternative possibilities can transform feelings of ‘wrongness’ into a moment of realisation and recognition.

In the most detailed saltwater scenario, the contributor includes others’ disbelief of their suffering as they describe how their complaints are trivialised (“it’s just dehydration”), minimised (“people have it worse”), or dismissed (“stop being a baby and suck it up”). This captures how gender dysphoria is often invalidated by those who have not experienced it personally. Such responses demonstrate how social reactions can exacerbate dysphoric feelings and delay recognition of dysphoria as legitimate and deserving of support. This echoes accounts of social invalidation reported in research on lived experiences of dysphoria. For example, Cooper et al., (2020) note that gender dysphoria not only results from “distress caused by the dissonance of assigned and experienced gender”, but also “distress due to the reactions of others to one's gender identity” (p. 8).

6.1.2. Either/Or Metaphors - Intolerances and Allergies

Another subclass of the Either/Or food/drink metaphor involves scenarios in which the available options are, in principle, suitable for human consumption (unlike saltwater), but are unsuitable for the individual under discussion due to an allergy or intolerance. A total of four metaphors involving an allergy/intolerance component appear in the dataset, as illustrated in Table 10 below.

Table 10. Intolerance and allergy metaphors

Scenario	Options	Frequency
Lactose intolerance	Lactose milk or lactose-free milk	2
Allergic reaction to vanilla cake	Chocolate cake or vanilla cake	1
Allergic reaction to bananas	N/A	1

Lactose Intolerance

Two contributors compare gender dysphoria to lactose intolerance. They describe scenarios in which they do not make a connection between their consumption of dairy milk and their resulting stomach aches until they try drinking a dairy-free alternative. This is reminiscent of the previous saltwater scenario in which it is only through sampling another option that the individual recognises the unsuitability of the first. The more detailed of the two lactose intolerance scenarios is presented below:

Imagine a world, where everyone drinks milk. You drink milk too, but it makes your stomach ache, and it gives you gas. For the longest time, you didn't think much of it, but as time goes on, your body starts finding the milk to be more and more unpalatable, so you seek help and ask others how they're handling all the stomach cramps and other digestive issues so well. They look at you a bit funny, bemused, not sure what you're talking about, and that's when it hits you: this isn't normal, others aren't having these issues. You learn that there is a name for people like you: lactose intolerant.

After a lengthy process, you're able to change your regular milk, to a lactose free one, and your digestive issues vanish. You feel better about yourself, your body no longer hurts the way it used to. Of course all the regular dairy drinkers think you're weird, perhaps even dangerous and subversive, for lactose free products give them gas in turn, and they're worried you're going to force their kids into consuming lactose free products as well, and I don't know, I guess at this point the analogy kind of falls apart :D

It all starts sounding very silly if you frame it like that. I had a whole bit about the Order of the Sacred Dairy, trying to convince lactose intolerance people into just "accepting who they were born as" but the deeper I went into it the sillier it became, and I realized I had gone off on a tangent.

In this scenario two socially acceptable options are presented: dairy milk and lactose-free milk. Neither is inherently better, but one is harmful to the individual's health, highlighting how people may react differently to the same product. This suggests that it is not the case that one gender identity is better than another, but one may be more suitable or comfortable for a

particular individual. As in the saltwater scenario, the unsuitability of the first option is not recognised immediately. Here, recognition is facilitated by seeking advice from others and exposure to alternate options.

Lactose intolerance draws on the embodied experience of physical pain (e.g., “stomach ache” and “stomach cramps”) to make the psychological pain of dysphoria tangible. As physical pain is universally understood, this mapping provides intersubjective accessibility to an experience that is unfamiliar to most. Although this metaphorical scenario may appear creative, it is an elaboration of the conventional conceptual metaphor EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL PAIN, evident in linguistic expressions such as “that *hurt* my feelings”, “that *cut deep*”, and “my heart *aches*”. This conventional metaphor underlies many of the scenarios in the dataset.

As the scenario develops it becomes clear that is shaped, and potentially constrained, by the target domain of gender dysphoria. The user describes the “lengthy process” of switching to dairy-free milk. In reality, this would be a quick change, however, the user is reliant on their understanding of the transition process in which it may take years to access gender-affirming care. Similarly, the claim that “regular dairy drinkers” view lactose-intolerant people as “weird, perhaps even dangerous and subversive” stretches the plausibility of the scenario. It is highly unlikely that others would react to lactose intolerance in such an overtly negative manner. The contributor acknowledges this explicitly, stating that “at this point the analogy kind of falls apart”. This metalinguistic comment demonstrates their awareness that as they expand the scope of the metaphor to capture further aspects of trans lived experiences, such as external opinions and reactions, it becomes increasingly unrealistic. Thus, while the metaphor is able to successfully convey the embodied discomfort and eventual recognition of dysphoria, it does not fully capture the broader social stigma trans people face.

Implausible examples such as this one are best accounted for using Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Here, two input spaces are evident: input space 1 corresponding to the source domain of lactose intolerance and input space 2 corresponding to the target domain of gender dysphoria. From input space 1, the metaphor projects the clear causal relationship between consuming milk and experiencing distress, including embodied pain

symptoms such as stomach-ache. From input space 2, it maps the discomfort and distress associated with dysphoria in addition to the lengthy and often challenging process of accessing gender-affirming care. Input space 2 also contributes the social disbelief, policing and stigma that frequently surround trans identities.

A generic space underlies both inputs which involves the idea of a persistent source of discomfort that is initially difficult to determine the cause of. In addition, both lactose intolerance and gender dysphoria are not choices. When the blend is "run", an emergent structure is produced whereby drinking dairy milk corresponds to living as one's assigned sex at birth, physical pain maps onto dysphoric symptoms, and switching to lactose-free milk maps onto transition, in whatever form this may take. The relief experienced after consuming the suitable alternative maps onto the experience of gender euphoria and the alleviation of dysphoria.

However, some implausible elements also emerge in the blend. For example, the blend inherits time from the dysphoria input space rather than the lactose intolerance input space. In reality, switching to a dairy-free alternative would be immediate, in the blend however it becomes a "lengthy process" mirroring lengthy waiting times associated with accessing gender-affirming care.

In addition, the contributor explicitly acknowledges the limitations of extending the scenario to include hostile social reactions. While lactose intolerance is a widely accepted medical condition, gender dysphoria is often moralised and politicised. The characterisation of lactose-free drinkers as "dangerous and subversive" draws from wider moral panic discourses surrounding gender diversity and applies it to a domain where such responses typically would not occur. Moral panic discourses are encouraged by far-right political activists, conservative religious groups, ostensibly left-wing feminists (often referred to as TERFs), and the media (Duffy, 2025). They frame trans people as a threat to cisgender women, children and the social order (Duffy, 2025). They present trans people as a "manifestation of deviance which needs to be suppressed" as transness represents "a radicality and fluidity that is the antithesis of the stable, bounded, cisheteronormative patriarchal family" (Duffy, 2025, p. 81). They further imply that there is a harmful transgender ideology which could indoctrinate children and strip them of their innocence

(Marshall, 2024; Duffy, 2025). This is echoed in the metaphor through the line “they’re worried you’re going to force their kids into consuming lactose free products as well”. The result is unrealistic and implausible, revealing how the metaphor strains when attempting to map social stigma from the target domain onto an otherwise neutral source domain.

This is further exemplified when the contributor invents the “Order of the Sacred Dairy” which tries to “convince lactose intolerance people into just ‘accepting who they were born as’”, perhaps in an attempt to reconcile these conflicting entailments. Here, they discuss policing and moralising of milk consumption perhaps to maintain consistency with the gender dysphoria target domain. Yet the result is unrealistic and absurd, perhaps reflecting the illogicality of the real-world policing of access to gender-affirming care. Sentiments that trans people should simply “accept who they were born as” are widespread, and can be exemplified with regards to a recent White House Executive Order titled “Executive Order 14187: protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation” (28 January 2025). In this order the White House refer to gender-affirming care as “destructive and life-altering procedures” and argues that they cloak themselves in “medical necessity, spurred by guidance from the World professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) which lacks scientific integrity”.

Thus, the metaphor conveys the embodied experience of dysphoria through understanding it in terms of a medical condition which is widely accepted, perhaps in an attempt to normalise it. It also exposes the incoherence of moral panics surrounding gender diversity, by demonstrating how absurd they appear when mapped onto lactose intolerance.

Cake Allergy

In addition to lactose intolerance, other contributors introduce an allergy component into their scenarios. In one case, the allergy is to a particular cake flavour. The contributor describes a party setting where every guest is handed either chocolate or vanilla cake upon arrival. They explain that they were initially given vanilla cake and although they try to enjoy it, over time it becomes increasingly unpalatable. The scenario details the lengthy process of discovering that they are allergic to vanilla cake.

Imagine life is a party that you just sort of show up to someday. When you walk in, someone hands you a slice of cake. You don't get to choose the chocolate cake or the vanilla, you're just given the vanilla. Okay, whatever. It's your first party, you're not really sure what the deal is with the cake yet, so who cares.

So you start checking the party out a bit. There's certainly plenty to do, and, as far as you can tell, everyone seems to be enjoying their cake. You have a bit of your vanilla cake, and okay, this isn't too bad. Nothing super exciting about it, but hey, free cake I guess. Everyone else that got vanilla cake looks like they enjoy it, and maybe as you get to know them it turns out they like some of the same other things you like, so you shrug it off. Quietly to yourself though you think "I kinda wish I got the chocolate, that looks pretty good". Maybe you say something, or maybe not, but if you do you find out that some people just get chocolate and some people just get vanilla and that's that.

"Oh well, that's disappointing, but I guess that's just what it is, so I should make the best of this vanilla cake," you think to yourself. "I shouldn't feel too bad, I bet everyone else who got vanilla cake would rather have chocolate too. I mean sure, if I could have chosen I'd have picked the chocolate, but I couldn't so I guess I'll live with it."

So the party goes on. You're just there, trying to vibe; there's really lots of stuff to do at this party. It can even be pretty fun at times, so you might kind of forget about the cake for a bit. Eventually though, something changes, your attention is brought back to the cake somehow. Maybe you start thinking "this cake is awfully bland, is it even vanilla, or just flavorless?" You realize that everyone else who got it seems to genuinely enjoy the vanilla cake though, so you guess there's just something wrong with you. If only you'd been given the chocolate cake when you walked in, you wouldn't have these worries.

So you start looking harder. Trying to figure out what the deal is. Maybe you've heard of people trading in their assigned cake for another. "They're probably just allergic to vanilla or chocolate, you think "so they just confidently said "I am terribly sorry, but I have an allergy, could you hand me a slice of the other cake". But as you keep digging

things start getting weird. It turns out they do have an allergy to vanilla, and the symptoms ... well they're kinda like what you've been feeling.

Now you can't stop thinking about cake, no matter what's happening at the party.

“If I switched to the chocolate cake, will the people who got chocolate to begin with get mad?”

“Will my friends who like vanilla think I'm rejecting them?”

“What if I only think I like chocolate cake?”

One day you realize you haven't really enjoyed the party in a really long time, it's this damn cake thing. You're obsessed, you can't keep going like this, but maybe something will happen.

Maybe you've even seen other people rejecting the vanilla cake they were given in favour of the chocolate. “Wow!” you think, “I'm so happy for them, that chocolate cake sounds like a dream! I wish I could do that!”

Maybe you have some cake switching friends, or maybe they're not even your friends per se, but they are awfully friendly. “There's a whole kitchen,” they tell you, where you can toss that cake and make a new one! It doesn't have to be chocolate or vanilla, it could even be raspberry if you'd like! You could make a different cake every day, or if you don't want any cake, that's fine too. Come by some time and you can try some and see how they taste.”

Maybe in secret you start trying a little chocolate cake. Just a little bite of frosting here, and a little crumb of cake there. Mmm...

And then on day you realize, damn this chocolate cake thing is my jam. And somehow, somehow, you eventually build up the courage to say:

“Give me the fucking chocolate cake!”

In this scenario the two cake flavours, chocolate and vanilla, appear to correspond to two different gender identities. The contributor explains that they had no choice over the vanilla cake they were initially given which seems to reflect the lack of agency in the sex one is assigned at birth. Despite their best attempts to eat the cake (or live as their assigned sex at birth), it causes discomfort which becomes increasingly unbearable over time. Much like in the previous scenarios, the contributor is left feeling as though there is something ‘wrong’ with them as everyone else seems content with their cake flavour (or gender identity).

They describe how they attempt to rationalise their situation by searching for commonalities with others who also received vanilla cake (i.e., share the same gender identity). They also reason that perhaps others secretly dislike the cake flavour they were given. Eventually, they learn that some people are “allergic” to their assigned flavour, and that the symptoms resemble their own feelings of dysphoria.

Unlike the lactose intolerance scenario, this metaphor does not majorly focus on the physical symptoms of allergic reactions. In this case, it appears as though the allergy initially manifests as mild discomfort; at the beginning of the narrative the individual could eat the cake, however flavourless and bland it was. However, over time it becomes increasingly unpalatable. This reflects the variability of gender dysphoria, which may emerge gradually for some individuals but be immediate and acute for others.

As the scenario develops, the contributor presents their doubts about switching cake flavours (or changing gender identities). Through an internal monologue, they voice fears of rejection, self-doubt, and uncertainty. However, after encountering “cake switching friends”, they learn that they have options beyond the binary initially available at the beginning of the party. Thus, through education and support, they gather the courage to demand the chocolate cake and affirm

their true identity. This touches on ideas of gradual realisation and the role of community support in affirming one's identity.

This metaphor also incorporates terminology from the target domain of gender dysphoria, such as “*assigned cake*” (italics added for emphasis), which alludes to the concept of assigned sex/gender. The result is a somewhat implausible world. In reality, one is not handed a slice of cake upon arrival to a party, and if one was, it would be unlikely that the cake would be “assigned”. The above two metaphor scenarios may reflect the challenges of applying a somewhat trivial source domain to an extremely complex target domain.

6.1.3. Either/Or Metaphors - Preference

The final type of Either/Or food/drink metaphor involves scenarios in which all of the options are socially acceptable and appropriate for human consumption, but the individual simply prefers one option over the other. A total of ten Preference metaphors were identified, covering a range of contrasts, including cold versus hot food, strawberry versus vanilla ice cream, and overcooked versus properly cooked food.

Cold Food

One variant of this metaphor involves a cold food scenario in which a contributor describes a restaurant setting where every diner except them is served hot food:

Everyone is at a restaurant and everyone except for me is getting served hot food. However, my food keeps coming out cold. Now this isn't especially terrible, but the food is not as satisfying and tasty as if it were hot. I mean I'll live, it will sustain me, but I won't feel completely full. However, I can't tell that my food is cold (not much of a difference visually) and I see everyone else is enjoying their food, so I don't complain, since I reason we are all getting the same thing. One day, I'm served a dish at the proper temperature, and it's amazing! Apparently this is what the food is supposed to taste like. But when I ask for my food to be hot from now on, the other customers complain, “your food was cold before and you never said anything, so why are you complaining now?” “Obviously you liked the cold food, why change?” And stuff like that. The thing is I did

not know that food could taste this good, but now that I do, I want to experience that like everyone else.

An extension of this is that maybe I don't always want to eat hot food, I mean cold ice cream and pizza are delicious. But does me eating cold foods every once in a while mean I should eat cold food all the time? No of course not!

As you might be able to tell, food is gender, and good taste is gender euphoria you get from the food.

This is an adaptation of one where instead of food, you are being served salt water instead of normal water, but I thought this analogy worked better for those who feel less intense gender dysphoria like me, or for those that enjoy multiple aspects of genders.

In this scenario, different food temperatures represent different gender identities. Unlike previous scenarios in which different variants of a food item equate to different identities (e.g., chocolate cake versus vanilla cake; dairy milk versus dairy-free milk), here it is the temperature that marks the contrast.

The contributor notes that being served cold food “isn't exactly terrible”, but that hot food is much more “satisfying and tasty”. This framing suggests a preference rather than an outright rejection: the individual does not hate the gender they were assigned at birth, but they find another identity more affirming. Moreover, they also note that “maybe [they] don't always want to eat hot food”. That is, perhaps they do not always want to live as one gender identity, but this does not mean that they should have to eat cold food (or live as their assigned gender identity) all the time. The contributor adds that some cold foods are “delicious”, suggesting that their feelings towards one particular gender identity fluctuate. Perhaps they enjoy some aspects of one gender identity but not others. Alternatively, there may be times at which one gender identity is preferred over another, just as there are times at which one type of food is preferred over another. Thus, within this mapping the contributor's preference for a particular gender identity is presented as less rigid than in other scenarios.

The contributor acknowledges that this is their “adaption” of the saltwater scenario for individuals who “feel less intense gender dysphoria” or “for those that enjoy multiple aspects of gender”. Thus, demonstrating how the FOOD/DRINK source domain can be adapted to reflect a diverse range of lived experiences.

Ice Cream

Another metaphor within the Preference category involves an ice cream scenario. The user describes a scenario in which a host at a party offers them vanilla ice cream, although they would much prefer strawberry, they decide they would rather have the vanilla ice cream than no ice cream at all:

Your food analogy reminds me of my ice cream analogy for being trans without strong/realized dysphoria (or without dysphoria at all).

My analogy is that I am at a party and the host offers me ice cream, but all they have is vanilla. Now I’m not particularly fond of vanilla, I’d much prefer strawberry which is my favourite ice cream flavour, but ice cream is ice cream. I don’t want to be rude to the host for not knowing to buy my favourite flavor, plus I want dessert so I’ll take a bowl of the vanilla. But if the host looks in the freezer, happens to find a tub of strawberry ice cream, and asks me if I still want vanilla or if I’d rather have strawberry, I’ll immediately ask for the strawberry. It’s not that the vanilla was ever bad or that there was anything wrong with it, it’s just that the strawberry is better.

Within this scenario the two ice cream flavours correspond to two different gender identities. This contributor explicitly acknowledges that their analogy is most appropriate for individuals “without strong/realized dysphoria (or without dysphoria at all)”. However, they state that they would still choose the “other option” if given the chance, suggesting that they do not feel entirely neutrally towards their sex assigned at birth. This metaphor highlights the importance of preference. Unlike the saltwater or lactose intolerance scenarios, where the initial option is actively harmful, here the initially assigned option is tolerable, though less desirable.

This scenario directly follows the cold food scenario in the thread, which itself mentions ice cream and may have influenced the contributor to share their own analogy. In addition, it is highly reminiscent of the cake flavour scenario, which was posted more than five months prior, suggesting that community members actively recycle and adapt metaphorical framings to better reflect their own experiences. In this sense, the ice cream scenario can be read as an adaptation of the cake flavour scenario, tailored to capture experiences of less intense, or potentially an absence of dysphoria.

6.1.4. Either/Or Food/Drink Metaphor Summary

This section has provided an overview of the Either/Or food/drink metaphors found within the dataset, those in which multiple options are available, but one is more acceptable, appropriate, or desirable. Three subtypes were identified, each capturing different types and degrees of gender dysphoria. Metaphors in which an option is not suitable for human consumption, either universally, such as in the saltwater scenarios, or personally, such as in the allergy/intolerance scenarios, reflect more intense dysphoria. In contrast, metaphors in which all options are socially acceptable but one is simply preferred, present milder dysphoria or in some cases an absence of dysphoria.

Across these subtypes, components such as allergic reactions, intolerances, and taste preferences provide contributors with ways of articulating the discomfort or incongruence they feel, while also highlighting the diversity of trans lived experiences. Crucially, these metaphors rely on widely accessible embodied experiences of eating and drinking, allowing contributors to communicate the nature and intensity of their dysphoria in a form that is both tangible and relatable.

6.2. Internal/External Food/Drink Metaphors

The second sub-category of metaphors within the FOOD/DRINK source domain is Internal/External food/drink metaphors. In these metaphors, the trans person is conceptualised as a food or drink product whose exterior packaging or label does not correspond to its internal contents. In contrast to the Either/Or food/drink metaphors where the trans person is presented as a consumer choosing between products, Internal/External food/drink metaphors position the

individual as the product itself, foregrounding a misalignment between internal identity and outward presentation.

All of the Internal/External food/drink metaphors can be considered instantiations of the container image schema in which a distinction is drawn between a product and its external packaging. This highlights a tension between appearance and internal reality. The Internal/External food/drink metaphors identified in the dataset are presented in Table 11, and a selection of these will be analysed in detail below.

Table 11. Internal/External food/drink metaphors

Scenario	Frequency
Mislabeled can	2
Wrong wrapper	2
Vegetables mistaken for fruit	1
Lemon seed in a tomato	1

6.2.1. Mislabeled Can Metaphors

Two contributors compare themselves to a mislabeled can in which the exterior packaging does not reflect the interior contents. For example, one contributor compares their dysphoria to being green beans inside a corn can:

When I describe dysphoria it's like buying a can of corn. On the outside, the label says corn. To everyone that sees the can, it is accepted that it is corn. You open the lid, and green beans are inside the can. Deep down ... You feel like green beans but everybody sees corn and all it really takes is a label change but to look like green beans and have it generally accepted that the label matches the product is akin to trying to match our outside (our label) to our (contents)-our sense of self.

Within this scenario the inner contents of the can (green beans) represent the individual's mind or gender identity, whilst the outer packaging (the can and its label) correspond to the body. The contributor places importance on the actual product, asserting that they "feel like green beans"

despite being externally labelled as “corn”. This suggests that although their body may reflect their biological sex, their internal sense of self does not align with this.

At the highest level, this metaphorical scenario realises the container image schema as a distinction is made between the can and its contents. At a lower, more detailed level it could also be considered a realisation of a MIND-BODY SPLIT SELF metaphor. Here, the true, authentic self is positioned as internal—the contents of the can—while the body is framed as external packaging.

Previous research has found that trans people may use MIND-BODY SPLIT SELF metaphors when they feel as though their “inner self” does not align with their “exterior” gender presentation (Lederer, 2015, p. 107). Lederer (2015) argues that such metaphors frame transitioning as a process of bringing these two selves into alignment by changing the body exterior so that it better reflects one’s internal gender identity. This notion is echoed here as the contributor states that “all it really takes is a label change” implying that the outer packaging (the body) should be modified to more accurately reflect the product (the mind).

In the second mislabelled can scenario, a contributor compares their dysphoria to feeling like Coke which was accidentally put into a Pepsi can:

Women are born Coke. Men are born Pepsi.

I’m Coke that was accidentally put into a Pepsi can.

You don’t consciously realise that you’re in the opposite can so your brain tries to tell you but it can’t do so verbally, so it shows you, makes you feel a certain way.

It does this because: It’s in the wrong body. It’s being drowned in the incorrect hormone. Your physical body doesn’t look correct and it’s missing certain parts of itself.

When you don’t know, you have no idea why/what is actually happening to you, but when you do know, it’s because you realise you’re in the opposite can.

This is dysphoria

Much like in the previous scenario, the product (Coke or Pepsi) represents the inner self (one's gender identity), while the can and its labelling represent the outer self (the body). Thus, being in the "wrong" or "opposite can" is therefore mapped onto the idea of being in the "wrong" or "opposite" body. In this case, the two different drink options correspond to a binary conception of gender, where women are "Coke" and men are "Pepsi".

This scenario occurs in the same thread as the above mislabelled can scenario; therefore, it could be suggested that it has potentially been influenced by it. Both scenarios focus on canned products with incorrect labelling, allowing contributors to emphasise that the contents (one's gender identity) are what truly matters, whilst the label (one's outwards physical appearance) is secondary. These scenarios also imply that changing the label does not change the product itself – it will remain the same despite changes to its packaging. In the same way, these contributors present their gender identity as stable and authentic, regardless of changes to outward appearance.

6.2.2. Mislabelled Confectionery Wrapper Metaphors

Two contributors compare gender dysphoria to piece of confectionary wrapped in the wrong wrapper. One contributor provides a more generic candy bar metaphor in which the type of confectionary is not specified:

I don't know why this has just popped to mind, but maybe candy bars might work as some kind of analogy. Or something that gets a coating applied to it, at any rate, where the insides are the part you really care about, the outsides are just some sort of bonus goodness or wrapping, but the outsides don't give you any clue about the insides. I'll have to ponder that some more...

Much like in the mislabelled can scenarios, the product is equated with the inner self while the packaging is equated with the outer self. Again, value is placed on the product, the candy bar,

rather than its covering which is presented as merely functional. This framing suggests that one's internal sense of self should be considered the true or authentic self, whilst the body should be viewed as simply a container for the self.

A second contributor provides a more elaborate Kinder Egg scenario. Kinder Eggs, also marketed as Kinder Surprises, are chocolate eggs containing a plastic capsule with a toy or figurine inside. The product is aimed at children, and some variants are considered to be gendered, with wrappers targeted towards girls or boys and toys reflecting stereotypical gender associations (e.g., dolls for girls, cars for boys). The contributor draws directly on this gendered marketing in their scenario:

The wrapper has “Boy” and “Dude” and stereotypically boy things presented on it. After you've enjoyed the chocolate and open the capsule, out falls a rainbow charm coated with a bunch of glitter. It's very confusing because it isn't what was expected, but that's exciting. Some people hate the mess that the glitter makes and find it annoying and gross, but to many it's shiny and beautiful no matter how difficult it is to clean up.

Here, the egg is wrapped in a “Boy” covering that does not match the inner capsule, which appears to be stereotypically feminine. Although the contributor does not explicitly state that the capsule is “for a girl”, this can be inferred from shared schematic knowledge of Kinder Eggs and from their description of the wrapped as featuring “stereotypical boy things” contrasted with a capsule containing a “rainbow charm coated with glitter”. In addition, “rainbows” and “glitter” are stereotypically associated with femininity.

The contributor frames the confusion of receiving the capsule in a positive light, describing it as “exciting”. While some people may consider glitter (or a feminine identity) as “annoying and gross,” others consider it “shiny and beautiful.” In this way, the metaphor suggests that a ‘mismatch’ between one's outward physical appearance and inner sense of self does not have to be viewed negatively. This ambiguity allows the metaphor to capture the varied responses people may have to learning that someone is trans, ranging from confusion to celebration. The Kinder

Egg scenario offers an alternate valence to previous Internal/External food/drink metaphors, rather than framing incongruence as problematic it presents it as potentially exciting.

6.2.3. Internal/External Food/Drink Metaphor Summary

In the Internal/External food/drink metaphors, a trans person is conceptualised as a food/drink product. At the most schematic level, these metaphors are instantiations of the container image schema, in which a distinction is drawn between the product itself and its packaging. At a more detailed level, they can be considered realisations of a MIND-BODY SPLIT SELF metaphor, where the food/drink product represents the inner self (or gender identity) and the product's packaging represents the outer self (or physical appearance). These metaphors are reminiscent of the Concealment clothing metaphors in which the true self is obscured by a covering or mask.

Internal/External food/drink metaphors enable contributors to capture the disconnect they may feel between their body and mind. Many of the scenarios imply that the outer self should be modified to better reflect the inner self, positioning transitioning as a form of 'repackaging' that brings external appearance into alignment with internal identity. Contributors also suggest that regardless of the label given to a product and despite the packaging applied, it remains the same. In this way, contributors use the FOOD/DRINK domain to emphasise that a person's true gender identity remains constant regardless of how others label them or how they appear physically. This foregrounds authenticity of internal identity over externally imposed labels or classifications.

6.3. FOOD/DRINK Metaphor Summary

This chapter has explored the two types of FOOD/DRINK metaphors identified in the dataset: Either/Or food/drink metaphors and Internal/External food/drink metaphors. The Either/Or metaphors convey the idea that the trans person is initially allocated or chooses the "wrong" option and undertakes a process of discovery to find the "right" option for them. In contrast, the Internal/External food/drink metaphors emphasise that the inner self constitutes the authentic self, regardless of how it is externally labelled or packaged. These metaphors collectively

foreground the process of negotiating identity in relation to external pressures, such as disbelief and stigma.

Across these metaphors, contributors draw on a wide range of components, including different types of food and drink products, varied physical reactions to consumption that range from mild discomfort to severe allergic responses, bodily sensations such as thirst, and everyday social settings such as restaurants and parties. These components are able to capture a range of different experiences of gender diversity.

Notably, the FOOD/DRINK source domain is not conventionally used in English to talk about complex, difficult and subjective experiences more generally, nor is it typically used to talk about the body or gender identity. However, at a more abstract level the distinctions expressed through FOOD/DRINK metaphors – between a right and a wrong option in the Either/Or metaphors, or a mismatch between inner reality and external appearance in the Internal/External metaphors – are more familiar within narratives of trans lived experience. What is creative, therefore, is the way contributors map these experiences onto an unusual source domain. This creativity allows contributors to depict feelings of discomfort and self-discovery through scenarios that are vivid, embodied and familiar. Much like the CLOTHING metaphors, some FOOD/DRINK scenarios incorporate slightly implausible or exaggerated elements, such as being unknowingly served saltwater in place of freshwater. Such implausibility may reflect the difficulty of explaining dysphoria to those without first-hand experience, while ensuring that the metaphor remains accessible. Overall, this demonstrates how unconventional source domains can be used to communicate complex experiences of gender dysphoria in ways that are relatively familiar.

Chapter 7: HEALTH/ILLNESS Metaphors

HEALTH/ILLNESS is the third most frequent source domain in the dataset, with twenty-three occurrences. This domain frames dysphoria as a condition of the body or mind that oftentimes requires medical attention or treatment. Contributors draw on a range of illnesses and conditions to present diverse experiences of gender dysphoria. These illnesses and conditions vary along several dimensions: some are curable, others incurable; some temporary, others permanent; some visible, others invisible; some psychological, others bodily; some urgent requiring immediate medical attention, whilst others are manageable. Given the breadth of the HEALTH/ILLNESS category, it is not possible to cover the range of illnesses/conditions under this domain in detail. Therefore, each illness/condition along with its frequency has been provided in Table 12 and selected scenarios will be explored in further detail below.

Table 12. Overview of the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain

Illness/Condition	Frequency
Broken bone	4
Phantom limb syndrome	3
Toothache	2
Tinnitus	2
Fever	2
Body parts as growths/tumours	2
Headache	1
Depression	1
Colour blindness	1
Needing glasses	1
PCOS	1
Diabetes	1
Gangrenous toe	1
Scarred/infected tissue	1

The prevalence of the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain is somewhat surprising given the growing resistance to the medicalisation of trans identities. Medicalisation is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, viewing trans identities strictly through a medical lens perpetuates the harmful idea that being trans is unhealthy or pathological. Historically, this perspective has led to trans

people being subjected to dehumanizing psychiatric treatments which contributed to the harmful belief that being trans is a mental illness. Furthermore, defining gender dysphoria as a medical condition can undermine trans people's bodily autonomy by implying that their gender identity is legitimate only when validated by a medical professional. This dependence on medical validation can create barriers to accessing gender-affirming care as trans people must navigate strict diagnostic criteria and assessment procedures. Movements such as the trans depathologisation movement have emerged to “[challenge] the dominant medical understanding of transgender” as a psychiatric condition – an understanding reflected in diagnostic manuals such as the *DSM* and *ICD* (Vähäpassi, 2013, p. 34; Pearce, 2018). These movements do not seek to remove access to medical interventions for transitioning individuals but advocate for a different understanding of trans health (Pearce, 2018).

In an ethnographic research project, Pearce (2018) identified two dominant intersecting narratives in trans healthcare discourses and practises: ‘trans as a condition’ and ‘trans as movement’. Discourses of condition frame ‘trans’ as “fixed, fixable and/or conditional” (p. 20). In this framing, trans is clearly defined and resolved, often (but not necessarily) through some form of cure or treatment (Pearce, 2018, p. 20). ‘Trans as a condition’ discourses imply that ‘trans’ can be ‘fixed’ with a certain level of expertise in the form of identification from a qualified expert, such as a healthcare professional (Pearce, 2018). Conversely, discourses of ‘trans as movement’ frame ‘trans’ not as a fixed category, but an open-ended “movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place” (Stryker, 2008, p. 1). In this context, expertise on trans identities does not lie with external institutions or professionals but emerges from collective community knowledge and individual lived experience (Green, 2017). Discourses of condition have clear links to the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain.

In this chapter it is proposed that contributors use the HEALTH/ILLNESS domain to lend credibility to their experiences by drawing on medical and scientific knowledge as it is often perceived as factual and objective. Framing gender dysphoria in medical terms allows contributors to validate its reality and counteract claims that gender dysphoria is ‘not real’ or simply ‘a choice’. This framing is also used to argue that access to gender-affirming care is not cosmetic or elective, but medically necessary and urgent.

7.1. Toothache Metaphors

Several contributors describe illnesses that cause persistent pain which is (initially) manageable but becomes unbearable over time, affecting their daily functioning. Such illnesses include toothaches, headaches, and fevers. These conditions are common and can typically be treated using medication or via medical intervention. However, the scenarios are oftentimes made implausible, and treatment is presented as difficult or impossible. A toothache scenario is presented below.

A toothache. It can start off as a noticed oddity, not really a discomfort, but lets you know its there. You ignore it as just a phase. Then it starts to feel sore, but is still manageable. It's probably just a loose tooth, leave it be and it will go away. Then something triggers it, a wrongly angled bite, splash of cool liquid, whatever, and the pain is intense, but brief. WTF was that? Maybe I should get it checked? Can't right now, take some pain meds, feel "better". The soreness comes and goes in intensity and behaviors are altered to avoid triggering the pain, at least as much as possible. At some point, it gets bad enough where you either want to rip the tooth out yourself, find an emergency dentist, or just end all of the pain permanently, a choice must be made. What transition can be like: Go to the dentist, my tooth hurts. Being told to please present myself to the world as an individual who has already been treated for a tooth ache before I can get a prescription for pain meds. Also, need two psych evals confirming that I am capable of living with being treated for the tooth ache as well as doctors note that I have been taking the medicine and brushing my teeth an entire additional year. Waiting months to years more for a dentist to become available to treat me. And all the while being treated by a large section of the population as a head case for believing that my tooth hurts in the first place. This analogy only really works on those who actually have experienced the pain of a real toothache.

In this scenario, the contributor not only expresses how gender dysphoria feels, but also critiques the process of accessing gender-affirming care and touches on their experiences of transphobia. They describe the development of their toothache over time – what begins as initial low-level discomfort transforms into unbearable pain. The physical pain of a toothache corresponds to the emotional pain of gender dysphoria; therefore, this metaphor can be considered a realisation of

the EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL PAIN conventional, conceptual metaphor. The contributor notes that their toothache began “as a noticed oddity” which may reflect their initial feelings of gender incongruence or dysphoria. However, they “ignore it as a phase”, potentially suggesting that they dismissed their feelings of gender dysphoria in the same way that people dismiss a toothache, hoping it will pass without the need for medical attention. This may reflect how many trans people initially dismiss their dysphoric feelings as a result of cisnormativity or internalised transphobia.

The contributor describes how their discomfort becomes so intense that it causes them to alter their behaviour to “avoid triggering the pain”. This may allude to the coping mechanisms they employed in attempts to minimise their gender dysphoria. Despite changing their behaviour, their toothache worsens to the point that they “want to rip the tooth out”, “find an emergency dentist” or “end all of the pain permanently” which touches on the potential life-threatening consequences of untreated gender dysphoria. This scenario appears somewhat implausible as a toothache is not typically considered to be a life-threatening illness. Perhaps this implausibility is used to suggest that much like toothache, gender dysphoria does not have to be life-threatening if it is taken seriously and treated appropriately.

The contributor problematises the bureaucratic process of accessing gender-affirming care through comparing it to a distressing experience at the dentist. They describe a scenario in which they are told to present to “the world as an individual who has already been treated for a tooth ache before [they] can get a prescription for pain meds” and how they “need two psych evals confirming that [they are] capable of living with being treated” in addition to a “doctors note that [they] have been taking the medicine and brushing [their] teeth an entire additional year” before their toothache can be treated. They also note that it takes months if not years for a dentist to become available, implying that they must continue to suffer in the meantime. This scenario is shocking and extremely illogical and is used to capture the complex processes that trans people must face before accessing gender-affirming care.

In the above scenario, the contributor may be referring to UK gender clinic treatment guidelines. In the UK, patients frequently wait months or years to get an initial appointment at an NHS

gender clinic after being referred by a GP. There are multiple waiting periods built into the WPATH Standards of Care (Pearce, 2018). For example, it is recommended that transitioning patients obtain a diagnosis of gender dysphoria from at least two gender identity specialists prior to accessing hormone therapy (Pearce, 2018). Diagnoses are made following assessments (usually in the form of interviews) undertaken on two or more separate occasions which are often weeks or months apart (Pearce, 2018). Prior to any genital surgeries patients must additionally “engage in 12 continuous months of living in a gender role that is congruent with their gender identity” (Coleman et al., 2012, p. 202)²⁰. This is commonly referred to as the ‘Real Life Experience’ or the ‘Real Life Test’²¹.

Pearce (2018) notes that “assessment procedures (...) can be seen as unnecessarily demanding by patients”, causing them to feel disempowered (p. 78-79). This sentiment is echoed in the toothache scenario. Bradley and Myerscough (2015) note that a patient’s entire life might seem to be about waiting lists. Transitioning patients may come to think in terms of the formal medical pathway, finding themselves ‘living in prognosis’ (Jain, 2007).

The contributor also addresses their lived experiences of transphobia as they state that they are “treated by a large section of the population as a head case”. This reflects a lack of acceptance and delegitimization of trans identities. It also alludes to the enduring impact of pathologisation; the view that being trans is a mental illness or disorder continues to shape public opinion. Overall, this scenario is implausible, but it is meant to be, to demonstrate how nonsensical current treatment guidelines are. As with the previous lactose intolerance example, this scenario is similarly implausible and could also be analysed using blending theory. Gender dysphoria is contrasted with the straightforward treatment of a toothache to expose how shocking and unjust current treatment delays and assessment procedures are.

²⁰ It should be noted that policies and procedures can vary considerably between (and within) gender clinics (NHS England, 2015 in Pearce, 2018, p. 66).

²¹ In some clinics, it is necessary that the patient undertakes the Real Life Experience before they can access hormone therapy, speech therapy and hormone removal (Pearce, 2018).

7.2. Tinnitus Metaphors

There are three instances in the dataset where contributors use tinnitus as a metaphor for gender dysphoria. Similar to the toothache scenario, tinnitus presents persistent discomfort. However, in this case, the discomfort is sensory rather than somatic, and it is framed as a background disturbance rather than acute physical pain.

Tinnitus has been my go-to analogy. It's how I've described it with my partner. If I've got white noise, I can ignore my tinnitus pretty well, just like I can distract myself from my dysphoria when I'm keeping myself busy. When is quiet, though... when there's nothing but still air and that damned ringing, it's so hard to think about anything except the ringing. It's so loud and overwhelming. Dysphoria can come in waves just like that. It can be easy enough to distract yourself sometimes, but then you get a moment alone with a mirror and you can't feel anything else except the overwhelming weight of how uncomfortable you are in your own skin.

In the above scenario, the contributor maps the persistent sensory discomfort of tinnitus onto the persistent emotional and embodied discomfort of gender dysphoria. They describe how when they are occupied or surrounded by “white noise” the intensity of their tinnitus decreases, much like how their dysphoria feels less intense when they are busy or distracted. However, in moments of stillness or solitude both tinnitus and dysphoria become overwhelming and all-consuming. Thus, this metaphor captures the situational nature of dysphoria which can increase and decrease in intensity over time.

The contributor is presented as having limited agency; while they are able to engage in distracting behaviours to reduce feelings of discomfort, this does not address the underlying cause of discomfort. Tinnitus is a chronic condition which cannot be cured, but it can be managed. Through comparing gender dysphoria to an incurable condition, the contributor may be suggesting that their dysphoria similarly cannot be permanently fixed but must be endured, potentially resisting the idea of a complete resolution or cure.

Finally, tinnitus is a condition that is often misunderstood or minimised despite being debilitating for many people. This parallels how dysphoria is often societally disbelieved or dismissed. Nevertheless, tinnitus is likely to be more familiar than gender dysphoria. Thus, the comparison invites empathy and understanding without requiring the addressee to share the experience firsthand.

7.3. Broken Bone Metaphors

While tinnitus offers a metaphor for chronic, manageable discomfort, other metaphors under the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain reference acute conditions that require more urgent medical intervention, such as a broken bone:

I always found the "broken bone" analogy worked well when trying to explain it to friends or family. You can't feel your bones until they are broken, then damn can you feel it. Gender dysphoria, for me at least, was very much like that. Brutal, crippling pain. Discomfort all the time, even when sat alone at home. Then I transitioned and that pain slowly went away.

In this scenario, the contributor explicitly articulates the metaphorical mappings, stating that you “can’t feel your bones until they are broken” in the same way that gender identity often goes unnoticed when it aligns with one’s assigned sex. However, when there is misalignment between gender identity and assigned sex, gender becomes a source of constant awareness and potential distress.

This scenario exemplifies El Refaie's (2014, 2019) concept of dynamic embodiment in which the body or body parts become salient through disruption or pain. Bones are typically a taken-for-granted, backgrounded aspect of corporeality; they only become acutely felt when they are fractured or broken and affect how one interacts with the world. Likewise, when gender identity is incongruent with assigned sex, the body can become a source of distress, and for some individuals, medical attention is similarly necessary. The contributor expresses gender dysphoria as a “crippling pain” that demands attention and intervention. In this framing, gender-affirming care is positioned as a form of treatment, aligning with Pearce’s (2018) framing of ‘trans as

condition'. It could be argued that dysphoria is pathologised, but not in a pejorative sense, rather in a way that validates and legitimises gender-affirming care.

Additionally, the metaphor alludes to cis privilege. Cis individuals have the privilege to move through the world without constantly questioning or 'feeling' their gender – their gender, like intact bones, remains unnoticed. For trans people, by contrast, gender is something that must be navigated and managed.

7.4. Diabetes Metaphors

Some contributors provide scenarios which reference chronic endocrine conditions such as thyroid disease, diabetes, and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) to position gender-affirming care as medically necessary. These comparisons frame dysphoria as a matter of hormonal regulation, suggesting it is a condition that, like other endocrine disorders, requires ongoing management through medical intervention.

My body is wrong. Because it doesn't match with how my brain is wired.
And just like with people who have thyroid disease or diabetes, my endocrine system doesn't make the right hormones. So i get a prescription to supplement my body to help me run. I'm not diabetic but I did have my thyroid removed 10 years ago give or take. And I have to take levothyroxine every day for that too. I don't see a difference. When your endocrine system is haywire you feel like crap. And there are ways to fix that feeling.

In the above scenario, gender dysphoria is positioned as an endocrine condition in which the body produces the incorrect hormones. The symptoms of dysphoria are presented as treatable through hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This frames HRT as a logical, medically necessary solution to a hormonal imbalance, comparable to taking insulin for diabetes or levothyroxine for hypothyroidism. This comparison potentially serves to normalise and destigmatise gender-affirming care by aligning it with treatments that are widely accepted and uncontroversial.

The contributor appeals to medical logic to achieve a didactic function – they argue that societally we do not object to individuals who require lifelong hormonal treatment for conditions such as diabetes, thus why should we object to the same for gender dysphoria? This draws attention to the moralising discourses that shape both public and medical responses to different conditions. As Sontag (1978) argues in her discussion of cancer and TB, some illnesses elicit sympathy and care whilst others are met with shame, doubt, or blame. This tendency to moralise illnesses can lead to the perception that some illnesses are more legitimate and therefore more deserving of treatment than others. Although gender dysphoria is not and should not be considered an illness, Sontag’s (1978) concept of morality is highly relevant here. Moral judgements continue to shape perceptions of what counts as “real” or deserving of care.

Gender dysphoria is often subject to moral scrutiny; individuals may be expected to prove the authenticity of their suffering before accessing medical support. Unlike the morally neutral status of a condition such as a broken bone, gender dysphoria is frequently positioned by the media, policymakers and politicians as a choice or something which is up for debate. Although hormones are routinely prescribed for thyroid dysfunction or PCOS, access to the same treatment for trans people is often delayed or contested which in turn shapes how gender dysphoria is perceived societally and medically. Thus, the scenario not only communicates how gender dysphoria feels using an embodied metaphor but also critiques systemic inequalities trans people face when accessing medical care.

Although the contributor clarifies that they are not diabetic, it appears that their lived experience of managing thyroid disease has influenced their metaphor production. They draw on their lived experience of taking hormones to position gender dysphoria as a chronic condition which can be managed with consistent care.

7.5. Tumorous Growth and Phantom Limb Syndrome Metaphors

Several contributors propose scenarios which foreground an incongruence between the lived body and self-image, describing either an unwanted presence or painful absence. For example, some contributors describe body parts, particularly those associated with biological sex characteristics, as tumours or growths.

It's feeling like some of your body parts are some sort of tumours, even if they look perfectly fine. like my chest has some weird growth or graph on it

The metaphor of a tumour or growth constructs these body parts as invasive, toxic, and in urgent need of surgical removal to preserve the self. The contributor describes their chest as having “some weird growth or graph on it”. This could allude to breasts which for some transmasculine or nonbinary people may feel incongruent with their gender identity. The premodifying adjective “weird” in conjunction with the vague noun phrase “growth or graph” evokes a sense of alienation from one’s body. This is an example of dys-appearance (El Refaie, 2014, 2019) as the chest is experienced as problematic and alien.

Whilst some contributors describe unwanted body parts, as is the case in the above scenario, others describe experiencing phantom limb syndrome to describe a different kind of dysphoric experience, namely one rooted in profound absence.

It feels like phantom limb syndrome for parts I wasn't born with.

This scenario addresses an ache for a body part that never existed, but it is deeply felt that it should have. Phantom limb syndrome involves remembering in the body image parts that have been lost from the material body (Prosser, 1989, p. 85). In his account of trans embodiment which draws from Sacks’ (1985) work on phantom limbs, Prosser (1998) argues that transsexuality and phantom limb syndrome both involve an incongruity between internal body image and the physical body. Prosser (1998) suggests that gender affirmation surgery is not a return to a previous body but rather “a recovery of what was not”. It is the recovery of a body that “should have existed” (Prosser, 1998, p. 84). Thus, gender dysphoria can be understood as a kind of phantom limb: a haunting sensation of bodily incompleteness, a deep ache for a body part never materially there but emotionally felt. Surgery then becomes a process which can both remove disowned parts and realize desired, phantomised ones (Prosser, 1998). In this way, both types of scenarios, unwanted growths and felt absences, are framed as conditions that can be ‘healed’ through surgical intervention.

7.6. HEALTH/ILLNESS Metaphor Summary

This analysis has demonstrated that the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain encompasses a variety of dysphoric experiences, ranging from those presented as more manageable to those presented as more life-threatening. These metaphors fulfil the communicative function of making gender dysphoria intelligible to a cisgender audience through referencing accessible, familiar experiences of illness and treatment.

HEALTH/ILLNESS is a relatively conventional source domain for talking about difficult, distressing experiences more generally. More specifically, EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL PAIN conceptual metaphors are particularly widespread. However, contributors make use of this conceptual metaphor in novel ways. For example, several scenarios intensify familiar health/illness experiences, such as presenting a toothache as life-threatening, to convey the overwhelming impact of untreated dysphoria. This creativity allows contributors to not only express discomfort or pain, but also to foreground the consequences of delayed, restricted or denied access to care.

There is a potential risk that these metaphors may be considered pathologising. In many scenarios, the contributor is presented as having limited agency; they are often dependent on a medical professional for access to treatment. Such disempowering framings may be intentional to critique systemic barriers embedded within current healthcare policies and practises. However, they may also reinforce the idea that trans identities require validation from a medical authority to be recognised as legitimate, mirroring broader discourses in which trans identities are framed as diagnosable and correctable, where medical expertise is privileged over lived experience (cf. Pearce, 2018, ‘trans as condition’).

These metaphors also align with broader historical accounts in which trans identities have been understood through a psychiatric lens. Although this is now widely understood as problematic and such accounts have been actively resisted by trans scholars and activists (cf. Pearce, 2018, ‘the trans depathologisation movement’) it may be difficult for contributors to avoid using medicalised language. As medicalised language continues to shape how transness is understood, it provides a familiar domain for articulating distress, urgency, and the need for intervention.

Drawing on medical discourse allows contributors to demonstrate that access to gender-affirming care is not cosmetic or elective, but medically necessary and urgent. Medical metaphors legitimise dysphoria by presenting it as necessary. In doing so, contributors challenge the moral hierarchies that determine whose suffering is believed and deemed worthy of care.

Overall, these metaphors reveal the complex discursive labour trans people undertake to prove the reality of their distress and justify their need for gender-affirming care. By creatively extending a conventional domain, contributors communicate their experiences in ways that remain accessible.

Chapter 8: Metaphor Evaluation

This chapter examines how metaphors were evaluated in the dataset. It begins by considering the ways in which metaphors were endorsed before considering the ways in which they were resisted. Following this, the chapter then provides an overview of which source domains received the highest levels of evaluation and considers the reasons for this.

8.1. Metaphor Endorsement

In total, ninety-six comments were coded as endorsing metaphor use. Across the dataset, there were 943 comments overall. Endorsement is defined as a comment which suggests positive evaluation of a metaphor, either explicitly (through praise or justification) or implicitly (through metaphor shifting in a way that is congruent with the metaphor's original use). Building on previous frameworks (Cameron, 2008, 2010; Mathieson et al., 2015), three broad categories of positive evaluation were identified:

- (1) *Generic endorsement* (53 comments, 55.2%): positive evaluation of a metaphor without further elaboration or justification. This category aligns closely with Mathieson et al.'s (2015) praise of/agreement with a metaphor.
- (2) *Justified endorsement* (17 comments, 17.7%): positive evaluation of a metaphor supported by a reason or explanation. This phenomenon has received little attention in metaphor research outside of discussions of metaphor aptness and success in psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics.
- (3) *Metaphor shifting* (26 comments, 27.1%): the repetition, rephrasing, or development of a metaphor in a way that is congruent with its original use²². This category introduced by Cameron (2008, 2010) includes vehicle development (repetition, relexicalisation, contrast, explication), vehicle redeployment, and literalisation. It also has links to Mathieson et al.'s (2015) elaboration/extension category.

Figure 13 provides an overview of the distribution of these categories.

²² Cameron (2008, 2010) does not state that examples of metaphor shifting *have to be congruent with the original use*. This nuance has been added here to define metaphor shifting as a form of (implicit) endorsement.

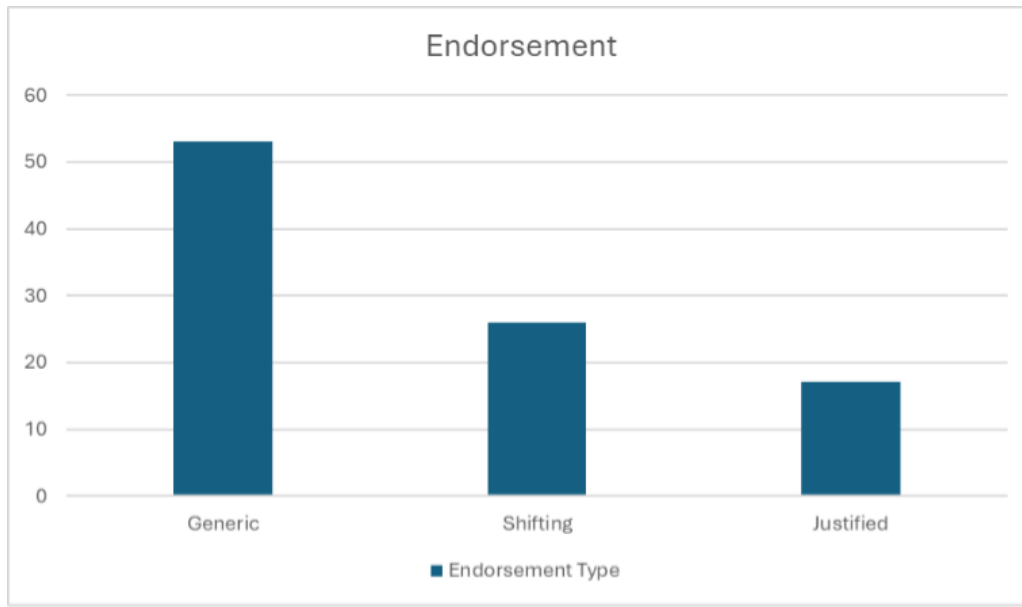


Figure 13. Distribution of endorsement categories

The following sections will explore each of the three endorsement categories in turn. Firstly, generic endorsement will be considered (Section 8.1.1), before discussing justified endorsement (Section 8.1.2), and metaphor shifting (Section 8.1.3).

8.1.1. Generic Endorsement

Generic endorsements were the most frequent form of positive evaluation in the dataset (53 instances, 55.2%). They typically consisted of short, affirmative comments such as “I like it!”, “That is literally the best way anyone can put it !” and “I really feel this one. Thank you for sharing.”. These responses did not provide a reason for why the metaphor was evaluated positively, but they nevertheless demonstrate the supportive environment of the subreddits. On Reddit, contributors can signal that they like a post or comment by upvoting it (similar to “liking” on other social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube). Therefore, by choosing to leave a written comment contributors demonstrated an extra level of personal engagement with the post. This builds visible solidarity beyond the platform’s affordances, potentially encouraging further sharing of metaphors.

8.1.2. Justified Endorsement

A total of seventeen comments (17.7%) offered explicit reasons why a metaphor was positively evaluated. These reasons reveal the criteria contributors drew on when judging metaphors to be successful, providing insight into the aspects of figurative language considered to be most important in this context. The reasons fall into four main categories, illustrated below in Table 13.

In two instances, contributors provided two different reasons for endorsing a single metaphor, these comments were therefore assigned two separate codes. As a result, while there were seventeen comments, a total of nineteen codes were applied.

Example 8.1. I have to say I love your metaphor for two reasons. One, it made the first year when I started letting myself explore the possibility of being trans make sense. That's exactly what it was like for me [*relatable - personally*]. Two, you don't relate it to sickness or pain. You aren't giving anyone a reason to think of us as abnormal or unfortunate, or worse in any way. Instead, your metaphor calls to mind themes of belonging, curiosity, exploration, growth, independence, learning, and peace. You have kept it so positive [*positive representation*]. I really just want to thank you for sharing.

Example 8.2. I absolutely love this. It fits my own experience with a nearly flawless metaphor [*relatable - personally*] and reads quite clearly [*simplicity*].

Table 13. Positive Evaluation with Justification Categories

Category	Definition	Example	Percentage
Relatability of source domain: (i) personally, or (ii) more generally	The metaphor is positively evaluated because it draws from a source domain which is personally relatable to the contributor's own lived experiences or it is relatable more generally.	(i) "I liked Abigail Thorne's metaphor in her coming out video comparing dysphoria to a dead-end job that you hate, mainly because I was working a dead-end job that I hated when I saw it"; (ii) "most people have had a shitty job so its very relatable"	(i) Personally 5 (26.3%); (ii) More generally 3 (15.8%)
Effectively captures a particular aspect of target domain	The metaphor is positively evaluated because it effectively or accurately captures a particular aspect of the gender dysphoria experience.	"this is a good one to represent that discomfort that (at first) is very hard to determine the cause of"; "I especially like that one for explaining why people are suddenly noticing all these trans folk appearing out of the woodwork"	7 (36.8%)
Simplicity	The metaphor is positively evaluated because it is simple, brief, or clear.	"like for its brevity"; "reads quite clearly"; "What an insightful and delightfully simple comparison. Kudos to you!"	3 (15.8%)
Positive representation	The metaphor is positively evaluated because it represents gender dysphoria, or more broadly trans people, positively.	"I love your metaphor (...) you don't relate it to sickness or pain. You aren't giving anyone a reason to think of us as abnormal or	1 (5.3%)

		unfortunate, or worse in any way.”	
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Relatability of Source Domain

The majority of endorsements with justification (8 instances; 42.1%) focused on the relatability of the source domain. Contributors endorsed metaphors because they resonated with their own lived experiences (5 instances; 26.3%) or were perceived as relatable more generally (3 instances; 15.8%). For example, two commentors positively evaluated HANDEDNESS metaphors due to their own lived experiences of being “the left handed child who was made to write right handed” and “a self-retrained left hander”. One of the commentors writes:

Nobody ever told me that using the left hand was wrong, I just assumed that I had to be right handed because most people are. (...) I think me being left-handed and being trans is very much interconnected (...)

Their endorsement of the metaphor is grounded in both conceptual and literal relatability. The metaphor is relatable due to the treatment of left-handers who are often pressured to conform, in addition to the commentor’s own assumption that they were right-handed (and cis) “because most people are”. Therefore, this metaphor captures how societal norms enforce conformity and encourage suppression of the true self. The endorsement itself seems to mark a moment of reflection or realisation as the metaphor enables the commentor to articulate their personal experience of dysphoria through another embodied form of ‘difference’.

Another source domain valued for being relatable was the JOB source domain. One commentor states that they like a JOB metaphor because they were “working a dead-end job” at the time they encountered it. In this instance, relatability is linked to the immediate situational context of the individual's life, which likely strengthened the metaphor’s accessibility. This has links to Landau et al.’s (2018) notion of source resonance, which proposes that metaphors are more effective when the addressee has strong feelings towards or ideas about the source domain. Here, metaphors seem to be valued when contributors recognise the source domain as familiar or personally relatable.

Other metaphors were positively evaluated for being relatable more generally. For example, another commentor positively evaluated a JOB metaphor as “most people have had a shitty job so its very relatable”. This suggest that metaphors were endorsed when they drew on experiences that are culturally familiar and widely accessible, particularly those that facilitate understanding between those with lived experience and those without.

The fact that relatability emerged as a baseline criterion for metaphor success potentially reflects the pedagogic function of many threads in which the original posters explicitly requested metaphors which make dysphoria easier to understand. Relatability functioned on two levels by both acting as a form of in-group recognition, validating lived experience and showing that one is not alone (e.g., “That’s exactly what is was like for me.”), and as a form of out-group education, ensuring accessibility to those without first-hand experience of dysphoria.

Effectively Captures a Particular Aspect of the Target Domain

Seven instances (36.8%) of justified endorsement expressed positive evaluation of metaphors because they accurately captured a particular aspect of the dysphoric experience. For example, in response to a CLOTHING metaphor (shoe on the wrong foot scenario) one contributor wrote that it effectively captured that “discomfort that (at first) is very hard to determine the cause of”. Similarly, in relation to a SPLIT SELF metaphor one contributor wrote that it was a “good one for social dysphoria”. In both cases, endorsement occurs because the metaphor is able to effectively represent a specific aspect of dysphoria, that likely feels recognisable to the commentor. Rather than being endorsed for providing a comprehensive account of the experience, these metaphors are valued for expressing one part of a complex experience.

Interestingly, contributors also resisted metaphors for failing to capture all aspects of the dysphoric experience (e.g., “For me personally the itchy sweater does not cover it all”). This tension will be further discussed in 8.3.1 *Limited Scope*. This demonstrates that evaluation was sensitive not only to what metaphors captured, but also to what they excluded. This suggests that the most successful metaphors balance both specificity and inclusivity.

Simplicity

Three comments (15.8%) endorsed metaphors for their simplicity or aptness, praising metaphors that were “brief”, “simple” or “clear”. For example, in response to a saltwater scenario one commentor writes: "What an insightful and delightfully simple comparison. Kudos to you!". Here, the metaphor is valued for its ability to turn a complex experience into a coherent scenario, which links to the compactness hypothesis (Fainsilber and Ortony, 1987).

Simplicity in this context is not associated with oversimplification but with communicative efficiency. This finding links to research on metaphor success which has suggested that successful metaphors often combine aptness with source domains that are familiar, accessible, and have a well-defined schematic structure (Thibodeau, Hendricks, & Boroditsky, 2017; Thibodeau et al., 2019 in Flusberg, Holmes et al., 2024). In addition, in the analysed subreddits communicative efficiency is particularly important, as contributors often aim to explain gender dysphoria to those without lived experience.

Positive Representation

Finally, one comment (5.3%) valued a JOURNEY metaphor for its positive representation, with a contributor explicitly praising it because it avoided associations with sickness or pain:

I have to say I love your metaphor (...) you don't relate it to sickness or pain. You aren't giving anyone a reason to think of us as abnormal or unfortunate, or worse in any way. Instead, your metaphor calls to mind themes of belonging, curiosity, exploration, growth, independence, learning, and peace. You have kept it so positive. I really just want to thank you for sharing.

This demonstrates the contributor's awareness of the framing effects of metaphor - it is not only important that a metaphor is apt, but also how it positions trans identities and frames dysphoria. Here, positive evaluation is linked to the metaphor's ability to resist pathologizing framings and foreground transitioning as an agentive, affirming process. This potentially touches on the (dis)empowering implications of metaphor choice.

Justified Endorsement Summary

Previous research has noted that metaphors may be explicitly praised or agreed with (Mathieson et al., 2015). The present analysis develops this work by identifying the reasons for such praise/agreement. It outlines the specific criteria contributors drew on when endorsing metaphors, thereby providing a more nuanced account of metaphor evaluation in practice. These findings demonstrate that while the simplicity and positive framing effects of metaphor were valued, contributors primarily endorsed metaphors for their ability to resonate personally, facilitate understanding beyond the trans community, and capture nuanced experiences of gender dysphoria.

8.1.3. Metaphor Shifting

Over a quarter of responses (26 comments; 27%) involved metaphor shifting; this typically involved repeating, rephrasing, or extending an existing metaphor in a way that remained congruent with its original use. Shifting not only demonstrates implicit endorsement of a metaphor, but active engagement with it as it is adapted to better fit a contributor’s own lived experiences or to achieve particular rhetorical functions, such as generating humour or signalling solidarity.

Instances of metaphor shifting have been coded using Cameron’s (2008, 2010) typology which is presented below in Table 14 with examples from the Reddit dataset. In total, twenty-six comments were coded as containing metaphor shifting, with one case assigned to two subcategories (explication and contrast), resulting in twenty-seven codes overall. This case is discussed in further detail below.

Figure 14. Forms of metaphor shifting (Cameron, 2008, p. 48-61, 2010)

Term	Definition	Example	Frequency
Vehicle Development	Vehicle introduced into discourse and used with the same or similar topic: (i) repetition – the term is repeated in identical or transformed form	“When the lion cub is born, he has spots. But he is not a leopard, and when the lion grows into his true pride, his spots fade and his mane grows in, and everyone can see clearly he is the Lion.	3 (11.1%)

		Only a fool would call a lion a leopard then. You are on your way to growing your mane.” → “That’s it fellas. We’re lions.”	
	ii) relexicalization – a near synonym of the term is used	“I am 35 and I have a similar analogy. Marcus (my former self) governed over the kingdom (Me) for many years.” → “I hope you can make Kiera the overseer of your land someday.”	2 (7.4%)
	iii) contrast – an antonymic or contrasting term is used	“Imagine you go to a costume party dressed as a police officer. You get to the party and start trying to mix in. Eventually the real police turn up to shut the party down and are glad you are already on site to assist. You realise it’s illegal to impersonate a police officer so you kind of go with it, hoping to quickly get changes when no one is looking. Next thing you know you’ve been on the force for 29 years, they are about to give you a gold watch and everything.” → “LOL yes! (...) Good think I’m finally off the force 😊”	1 (3.7%)
	iv) explication – expansion, elaboration or exemplification of the term	“it’s like wearing shoes the wrong way your entire life and wondering why your feet hurt all the time and why you have hip/knee issues.” → “and when you complain about it, everyone is angry at	18 (66.7%)

		you because their shoes are just fine.”	
Vehicle redeployment	After its first use, a vehicle term is reused in identical or similar form to talk about a different topic	“So, imagine you're in a restaurant. Everyone there is being served water, but you somehow keep getting salt water in the process (...)”→ literally, one of my first trans awakenings was when this group of girls in middle school had me try on one of their shoes (...) it was like trying someone else’s water and going okay there is something wrong with my water”	3 (11.1%)
Literalisation	A vehicle term is used non-metaphorically to refer to a topic		

Vehicle Development

All four forms of vehicle development were observed in the dataset.

Explication

Explication was the most frequent form of vehicle development with eighteen occurrences and involved expanding, elaborating, or exemplifying a vehicle term (Cameron, 2008). For example, one contributor posted the following shoe on the wrong foot scenario comparing the physical discomfort of gender dysphoria to the unpleasant sensation of wearing one’s shoes incorrectly:

it’s like wearing shoes the wrong way your entire life and wondering why your feet hurt all the time and why you have hip/knee issues.

Another contributor added:

and when you complain about it, everyone is angry at you because their shoes are just fine.

Here, the second contributor does not introduce a new source domain but explicates the existing one (wearing shoes incorrectly). The first scenario focuses solely on the embodied experience of physical pain, whereas the second scenario elaborates this to capture how the pain is invalidated by others. Thus, the second contributor offers a social critique of others' negative reactions and dismissal. In this case, the conjunction "and" clearly flags this comment as an explication of the original scenario.

Another case of explication similarly foregrounds the societal dimension of dysphoria. One contributor extends the toothache scenario presented in 7.1 as follows:

How dare these people just mutilate their teeth?! My sister's boyfriend's mother's daughter was like that, she mutilated her teeth and then regretted it! She didn't say she did, but it's obvious she would be, since it makes no sense to be happy after mutilating your teeth!

This response is an example of explication as the contributor elaborates the original toothache scenario to focus more on the societal dismissal and denial of gender-affirming care. Although the original scenario mentions "being treated by a large section of the population as a head case for believing that my tooth hurts in the first place" the second contributor develops this idea further. They employ explication to capture hostile discourses around transition. The explication mimics transphobic rhetoric: framing gender-affirming care as "mutilation," focusing on the possibility of regret, and relying on second-hand anecdotal 'evidence'. The exaggerated source "my sister's boyfriend's mother's daughter" demonstrates how far-removed and yet how personally-invested such accounts appear. This development is deliberately illogical and extreme, one would not ordinarily react to dental treatment or tooth extraction in this manner, highlighting how nonsensical transphobic arguments are. By exposing this contrast, the contributor implies that gender-affirming care should be regarded as equivalent to other forms of medical treatment. More broadly, this example exposes how gender dysphoria is not only lived individually but also shaped and exacerbated by others' discourses of delegitimization.

In another case of explication, one contributor elaborates the saltwater scenario presented above in 6.1.1:

See me at table 9 chugging a pitcher that isn't mine

This comment is a clear example of explication because the contributor does not introduce a new metaphor but elaborates the saltwater scenario by intensifying it. There is a shift from an implied “glass” in the original scenario to “a pitcher” amplifying the sense of quantity. In addition, the verb choice of “chugging” rather than “drinking” conveys sense of urgency, desperation, and loss of control.

Explication demonstrates the co-construction of metaphorical scenarios, as community members collaboratively build upon each other’s metaphors to better reflect their own lived experiences. In these exchanges, the original scenario functions as a template that can be adapted to reflect personal experiences and/or capture different aspects of gender dysphoria, including embodied discomfort, prolonged waiting times, and experiences of transphobia. Explication is an active and often time-consuming process which demonstrates strong engagement with and understanding of the metaphor.

Beyond articulating individual experiences, explication also serves interpersonal functions. By reusing and developing each other’s imagery, contributors collectively construct a shared repertoire through which solidarity is expressed, and an in-group identity is built and reinforced.

Repetition

Repetition occurred three times and involved a contributor directly repeating the wording used in another metaphor. Repetitions primarily served the function of expressing solidarity. An example of repetition can be seen in response to a METAMORPHOSIS metaphor:

When a caterpillar cocoons and metamorphosizes, do we consider the caterpillar "dead"?
No. The butterfly who emerges is considered the same individual as the caterpillar we saw go into the chrysalis. When the lion cub is born, he has spots. But he is not a leopard, and when the lion grows into his true pride, his spots fade and his mane grows in, and everyone can see clearly he is the *Lion*. Only a fool would call a *lion* a leopard then. You are on your way to growing your mane. [italics added for emphasis]

Another contributor responds:

That's it fellas. We're *lions*. [italics added for emphasis]

This is a clear instance of repetition because the contributor repeats the noun phrase “lion” from the original scenario, though in its plural form. Rather than elaborating or developing the metaphor, the commentor condenses it into two simple sentences, creating a collective identity for the group (“That’s it fellas. We’re lions.”). The comment shifts the focus of the metaphor from an individual process of metamorphosis into a collective experience of bravery and strength. Interestingly, this repetition appears in a female-to-male subreddit, which may explain why the contributor chooses to reuse the “lion” element of the scenario. Lions are conventionally associated with masculinity, courage and strength, and the repetition here reinforces these qualities as shared attributes of the community. This demonstrates how metaphors can be reused to negotiate and assert collective identities and display solidarity.

Relexicalization

Relexicalization occurred twice. One contributor proposes a kingdom scenario belonging to the SPLIT SELF source domain:

I am 35 and I have a similar analogy. Marcus (my former self) *governed over the kingdom* (Me) for many years. (...) [italics added for emphasis]

Another contributor responds:

Thank you for sharing that. I'm glad to see someone else that views our situation in a similar way. I hope you can make Kiera *the overseer of your land someday*. [italics added for emphasis]

This comment is an example of relexicalization rather than repetition as the contributor adopts the same kingdom scenario but slightly adapts its phrasing. Instead of directly repeating “governed over the kingdom” they shift to “overseer of your land”. Interestingly, the latter has a less harsh or forceful connotation, potentially suggesting more harmony or balance. This demonstrates how contributors can adopt the same scenario whilst adapting its evaluative framing. In addition, by drawing from the same scenario, the contributor signals their solidarity

(“glad to see someone else that views our situation in a similar way”) and suggests that they have had a similar experience of gender dysphoria.

More broadly, this example demonstrates the community-building function of the subreddits, where metaphor moves beyond a linguistic resource for describing experiences to becoming a shared repertoire used to offer support. Much like repetition, relexicalization primarily serves the function of expressing solidarity.

Contrast

Contrast was infrequent in the dataset, occurring only once. This example was also coded as an instance of explication:

Imagine you go to a costume party dressed as a police officer. You get to the party and start trying to mix in. Eventually the real police turn up to shut the party down and are glad you are already on site to assist. You realise it’s illegal to impersonate a police officer so you kind of go with it, hoping to quickly get changes when no one is looking. Next thing you know *you’ve been on the force for 29 years*, they are about to give you a gold watch and everything. You can’t handle living this lie anymore and really just want to have the life you were supposed to have; but your terrified because now you have been impersonating a police officer for an entire career and surely they will lock you up and throw the key away. You wish you just went to the party as a slutty cat like every other girl in 2004... [italics added for emphasis]

Another contributor responds:

LOL yes! And in my case I wanted to go as the cat girl to the party, but my family told you no , so I sucked it up and went as the officer, and all this shit happened. Good think *I’m finally off the force* 😊 [italics added for emphasis]

In the first metaphor “on the force” refers to concealing one’s trans identity and continuing to live as one’s sex assigned at birth. In the second comment, the contributor reworks the phrase to “off the force” to refer to living as openly as one’s gender identity. This is an example of contrast

as an antonym is used (“off” as opposed to “on”). Although there is contrast, the comment still functions as endorsement – the contributor not only adopts the original metaphorical scenario but extends it to articulate their own experiences.

The second comment is also an example of explication as the scenario is elaborated with additional details, including familial reactions. This highlights how contributors are able to rework metaphors to better reflect their personal lived experiences.

Vehicle Redeployment

Vehicle redeployment occurred three times in the dataset. This refers to instances where a contributor took the source domain from the original metaphor and applied it to a different target domain. These instances of vehicle redeployment served a personal function, as the metaphor was adapted to reflect a personal experience.

For example, one contributor proposed the following saltwater scenario:

So, imagine you're in a restaurant. Everyone there is being served water, but you somehow keep getting salt water in the process. Of course, it doesn't look any different, but it tastes awful and literally dries you out. But you wouldn't be able to tell the difference, because you only have your salt water to compare it to. Anytime you complain that you're thirsty, which is due to the water being salty, you get told to have some more, even though it is literally the root cause of your problems. But you don't realize this. Everyone else is just fine, so clearly, the problem must be with you. It is only when you get to try someone else's water that you realize the source of the problem had never been you all along.

In response a second contributor wrote:

literally, one of my first trans awakenings was when this group of girls in middle school had me try on one of their shoes (...) *it was like trying someone else's water and going okay there is something wrong with my water* [italics added for emphasis]

In this example, the second contributor redeploys the saltwater scenario and applies it to their own gender-affirming experience of trying on women's shoes for the first time. The reuse adopts the underlying contrast of having a right and a wrong option (i.e., freshwater versus saltwater or men's shoes versus women's shoes) without introducing new elements into the scenario. In both scenarios, there is a focus on the process of discovery through experience and experimentation – both contributors do not realise their initial option is “wrong” until they try an alternative. This example of redeployment demonstrates how an implausible figurative scenario can be mapped onto a literal embodied experience, highlighting how metaphors acquire new levels of meaning depending on a contributor's personal history.

In another case of redeployment, a contributor redeploys the saltwater scenario to highlight lengthy waiting times for access to gender-affirming care:

Must be a shitty restaurant if it takes up to 5 years just to get a new glass of water. 🙄

This contribution has been coded as redeployment as it shifts the target domain of the original metaphor. Whilst the original saltwater scenario focuses on embodied discomfort, this scenario focuses on waiting times. The reference to “five years” directly alludes to waiting lists for gender-affirming care and may reflect the contributor's personal experience of delay. In addition to offering a social critique of access to care, this addition is also humorous. The commentor expresses their shared frustrations through a sarcastic tone, the use of taboo language (which is often used for humorous purposes in the subreddits), and the eye-roll emoji. Humour is defined as “a lighthearted, non-serious attitude toward ideas and events” (Martin 2007, p. 1). Following Semino and Demjén (2017), though asynchronous and computer mediated (Dynel, 2011), this comment could be considered an example of “conversational” humour, where humour is co-constructed by participants reacting to each other (Coates 2007). Conversational humour can signal and contribute to group bonding and solidarity through the “play frame” (Coates 2007; Hampes 1992; Dynel 2011 as cited in Demjén & Semino, 2017). Metaphor has also been shown to have serve these functions (Demjén & Semino, 2017), particularly when the metaphors used are creative (Horton 2013). This seems to be the case here, as humour is used to deal with the difficult experience of prolonged waiting times for gender-affirming care.

Another example of vehicle redeployment is evident in the following toothache scenario. One contributor compares dysphoria to progressive dental pain:

A toothache. It can start off as a noticed oddity, not really a discomfort, but lets you know its there. You ignore it as just a phase. Then it starts to feel sore, but is still manageable. It's probably just a loose tooth, leave it be and it will go away. Then something triggers it, a wrongly angled bite, splash of cool liquid, whatever, and the pain is intense, but brief. WTF was that? Maybe I should get it checked? Can't right now, take some pain meds, feel "better". The soreness comes and goes in intensity and behaviors are altered to avoid triggering the pain, at least as much as possible. At some point, it gets bad enough where you either want to rip the tooth out yourself, find an emergency dentist, or just end all of the pain permanently, a choice must be made. (...)

In response, another contributor draws on their personal experience of a toothache and root canal treatment:

I had a really bad toothache for a week. I had to get a root canal because my tooth was dead. When I finally got the dental work done, the pain went away. The absence of pain felt absolutely wonderful. *I was reminded of that relief when I went on estrogen. It was like the toothache went away.* [italics added for emphasis]

The second contributor's response has been coded as vehicle redeployment as the HEALTH/ILLNESS source domain, initially used to capture the embodied pain of gender dysphoria, is reapplied to a related but distinct target domain, namely the relief experienced when beginning of hormone replacement therapy. Rather than describing what dysphoria feels like, the contributor uses the toothache scenario to explain what it felt like when that pain subsided. The metaphor is thus redeployed to highlight a different stage of experience — not dysphoria itself, but its alleviation.

This response also illustrates the blurred boundaries of Cameron's (2008, 2010) typology. The contributor draws on a literal case of the metaphorical scenario (experiencing toothache) as the

basis of their figurative comparison, and thus could potentially be considered an example of literalisation. However, the central metaphorical move remains the redeployment of the toothache scenario to a new target: the embodied relief of transition through oestrogen.

8.1.4 Endorsement Summary

These findings have drawn from and developed existing approaches to metaphor endorsement to capture all instances of positive evaluation found in the dataset. It has been demonstrated that positive evaluation serves various discourse functions. Generic positive evaluation primarily expresses support and solidarity by affirming that a metaphor “works” and is understandable. Though generic positive evaluations do not state the reason why a particular metaphor was judged favourably, they demonstrate a higher level of engagement than an upvote alone. On the other hand, justified positive evaluation offers insight into what makes for a successful metaphor, a phenomenon that has been largely under researched to date. Four types of justification were identified: relatability both personally and more generally, effectiveness in capturing a particular aspect of the target domain, simplicity and positive representation of the target domain. Finally, metaphor shifting demonstrates the various ways in which contributors can co-construct metaphors such that they better reflect their own lived experiences or capture additional dimensions of the target domain. Metaphor shifting can also be used to demonstrate solidarity and support.

8.2. Metaphor Resistance

This section will present the manifestations of resistance identified in the dataset. The term resistance is used here to refer to comments which expressed a negative evaluation of a previous metaphor or a negative evaluation of the use of figurative language more generally. A total of thirty-one comments were coded as containing resistance to metaphor. All instances of resistance were accompanied by some form of justification. Commentors did not resist a metaphor without providing a supporting explanation which suggests that resistance in these subreddits is a reflective and constructive process. Oftentimes, resistance was mitigated through the use of positive face-work strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Comments expressing resistance often began with partial agreement or praise such as “I like it but ...”. In addition, resistance is notably less frequent than endorsement (31 instances versus 96 instances

respectively) providing further evidence that the subreddits are a supportive environment. This challenges the general assumption that online interactions are inherently combative and prone to impoliteness (Culpeper et al., 2025).

When categorising the resistance comments according to their justification, I drew from Declercq and van Poppel's (2024) framework for metaphor evaluation. Following van Poppel and Pilgrim (2023), Declercq and van Poppel (2024) distinguish between four levels of resistance: propositional, locutional, personal, and situational. Only propositional and locutional resistance were evident in the Reddit dataset. I therefore adapted and refined Declercq and van Poppel's (2024) model, inductively developing additional sub-categories to reflect the justifications found in the data.

The revised framework is presented below (Table 15). It retains the broad distinction between propositional and locutional resistance but extends it to include 'experiential resistance' resulting from a lack of personal resonance or familiarity with the source domain and 'general resistance' to metaphor use for gender dysphoria (cf. van Poppel & Pilgrim, 2023)²³.

²³van Poppel and Pilgrim (2023) introduce the concept of general criticism to metaphor to refer rejection of metaphors (or rhetoric or figurative language) in general. I use general resistance here to refer to resistance directed at a particular target domain which in this case is gender dysphoria.

Table 14. Adaptations to Declercq and van Poppel's (2024) model

Main category	Subcategory	Definition	Example	Frequency
Propositional resistance (cf. van Poppel & Pilgrim, 2023)	Negative entailments (material premise)	The metaphor carries problematic or inaccurate assumptions (e.g., implying that being trans is a choice, defect, or illness)	"Eh, it's not a bad metaphor for how we're treated, but it makes us seem like we're defective."; "This is a good one, but does involve 'choice'. Being trans does not."	5 (16.1%)
	Vagueness (material premise)	The metaphor is too general or not specific to the target domain	"Metaphors like this are very personal. Personally I don't like your cake analogy because I feel like cake is uuuh, just not a very big deal? :P (...) Well without being flippant, the issue for me is that the cake metaphor is just a really vague metaphor, it could be used for any random thing where you are thinking about doing a different/new thing. Like, the cake metaphor could be used for changing your wardrobe, or hairstyle. It doesn't really touch upon anything more concrete and specific to being transgender to me"	1 (3.2%)
	Limited scope (material premise)	The metaphor omits key aspects of the experience or applies only partially	"For me personally the itchy sweater does not cover it all. I can nowadays changes a sweater without impact. Changing my gender is not without impact. (...)"	5 (16.1%)
	Mappings do not work (connecting premise)	The source-target mapping does not 'work' in reality; literal knowledge of the source	"Don't diesel engines explode if you run gasoline through them?"	2 (6.5%)

		domain contradicts with the metaphor		
Locutional resistance (cf. van Poppel & Pilgrim, 2023)	Lack of clarity	The metaphor is unclear or difficult to understand	“I’m not sure that’s a good analogy, I have trouble following that one.”; “I don’t really get it. What do the shoes represent? (...)”	3 (9.7%)
Experiential resistance	Lack of personal resonance with the source domain	The metaphor is intelligible but does not personally resonate	"i like this one, but I also really like riding my motorbike. so I guess this one doesn't work for me xD"	1 (3.25%)
	Lack of familiarity with the source domain	The metaphor is intelligible but the audience are not familiar with the source domain	"I like this one, but they are not really computer people so they might not get the analogy fully. I can see what your going for with it, so I will keep this idea in mind thanks."	1 (3.25%)
General resistance	Resistance to figurative language use for a given target domain	Resistance to the use of metaphor to talk about gender dysphoria	“We don’t need analogies, cis people can experience gender dysphoria.”	13 (41.9%)

8.2.1. Propositional Resistance

There were thirteen instances of propositional resistance in the dataset. Propositional resistance refers to criticism directed at the content of a proposition (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023). It occurred when contributors rejected a metaphor because of its material premise (how the target domain is represented) or the connecting premise of the argument (the correspondences between the source and target domain) (van Poppel & Pilgram, 2023). Within this category, four sub-categories emerged: negative entailments (n=5), vagueness (n=1), limited scope (n=5) and mappings do not work (n=2). These subcategories will be explored in detail below using illustrative examples.

Negative Entailments

Resistance focused on negative entailments addressed problematic assumptions that follow on from a metaphorical mapping, such as the implication that being trans is a defect, illness, or a choice. The negative entailments category is related to the material premise of a metaphor which concerns how a target domain (in this case, gender dysphoria) is represented. In some ways, it can be considered the inverse of the *Positive Representation* category under metaphor endorsement.

One example of resistance focused on a metaphor's negative entailments is from a discussion in which a contributor proposed a FOOTBALL TEAM metaphor for gender dysphoria, a source domain that occurs only twice in the dataset. The contributor compares being trans to being born into a family of Tottenham supporters while knowing they are an Arsenal fan. The original poster appears to use this metaphor to communicate the experience of familial tension as a result of one's identity:

I think if you do it, try to use something they can emotionally connect to. Imagine if they are arsenal fans (uk football, soccer if you are American). Something like

'so, imagine if you were born in a house down the road where your family support Tottenham. Everyday they talk about it, but inside you know it is wrong for you. You are a gunner (arsenal fan) through and through, but it is so difficult to tell them. The shame of that in a Spurs (Tottenham) house is unbearable. Well, that is me, I have tried and failed to be how I was brought up, it isn't right for me, it eats away at me, and I want to be true to myself and my beliefs

However, another commentor resists this metaphor, focusing on the problematic entailments it produces:

This is a good one, but does involve 'choice'. Being trans does not.

This resistance is focused on the metaphor's underlying entailments. The commentor challenges the notions of choice and agency implied by the mapping which are problematic when applied to the target domain of being trans. In doing so, they resist reproducing the idea that gender identity is a preference or "choice". Such rhetoric, often found in anti-trans discourse, undermines the legitimacy and authority of trans people. Therefore, this act of resistance potentially functions as a means of affirming and validating trans people's experiences and identities, while preventing the spread of potentially harmful ideas.

In response, the first contributor defends their metaphor by redefining supporting a particular football team as an identity rather than a choice:

I think if you asked a true football fan if they had a choice, they would disagree. The ones I know take it very seriously

This defence seeks to counter the resistance by asserting that the metaphor does not produce the entailment of choice as the contributor does not consider supporting a football team to be a choice. Rather, they view it as an act of being true to oneself. The contributor foregrounds the similarities between supporting a football team and identifying as trans by suggesting that both are 'serious'. Moreover, they suggest that both are internal experiences that can produce tension

in familial contexts. In this way, the focus of the metaphor is on belonging and authenticity rather than choice – highlighting the deeply felt experience of having an identity that others do not understand or may even find problematic.

The second contributor replies to this by reasserting the limits of the comparison:

This is true, of course, but we're not talking about football

They emphasise that “we’re not talking about football” and therefore the focus should be on lived experience. This statement shifts the focus of the discussion from the source domain back to the target domain, moving from the figurative to the literal, reasserting that the metaphor does not capture the reality of being trans.

It is unusual in the dataset to find this number of back-and-forth comments between the same two contributors. This interaction demonstrates the personal nature of metaphor use and evaluation.

Vagueness

One instance of resistance focused on the generality of the source domain, suggesting that it was too vague to capture the intensity of gender dysphoria. This occurred in response to the cake flavour scenario introduced in Section 6.1.2 which compared gender identity to being given a cake flavour one is allergic to, rather than the flavour one desires.

Metaphors like this are very personal. Personally I don't like your cake analogy because I feel like cake is uuuh, just not a very big deal? :P Like, I can't shake this internal voice going "who gives a shit about fucking cake", haha. Like not getting the right cake, who cares. If someone whines to me about cake, I tell them to suck it up. If someone talks to me about dysphoria, I empathise. Well without being flippant, the issue for me is that the cake metaphor is just a really vague metaphor, it could be used for any random thing where you are thinking about doing a different/new thing. Like, the cake metaphor could

be used for changing your wardrobe, or hairstyle. It doesn't really touch upon anything more concrete and specific to being transgender to me. For me, ages ago I read this post about how to describe dysphoria and it stuck with me. [commentor pastes a link to a Reddit thread proposing a JOB metaphor for dysphoria] I think that's the best analogy/metaphor to describe how I feel I've ever read.

Here resistance is focused on the metaphor's vagueness and lack of specificity. The commentor argues that the metaphor is too broad to effectively convey the gravitas of gender dysphoria. In addition, it is suggested that the source domain of cake flavour risks trivialising the experience equating it to minor lifestyle choices such as "changing [one's] wardrobe" or "hairstyle". This could have the harmful effect of implying being trans is a matter of preference or a choice, rather than an identity.

However, this example of resistance is constructive; the commentor provides a link to an alternative JOB metaphor which they believe provides a more accurate representation of their experience. Thus, rather than straightforwardly rejecting the metaphor, they reframe the discussion, positioning themselves as a collaborator.

The original poster of the cake flavour scenario responds reflectively, acknowledging the strengths of the commentor's JOB metaphor, recognising the limitations of their own metaphor, and explaining their choice of source domain:

Haha, that's totally fair. That's certainly something about Abigail's job metaphor that I really liked where mine feels lacking; having a horrible job is absolutely something that can and will absolutely take over your life and suck the joy out of everything.

Having the wrong cake? Not so much. :p

On the flip side though, I feel like there's something there that is actually kind of why I like the cake one? You're absolutely right in that it's a personal thing; while I was trying to be inclusive in my language to hopefully make it relatable, my main goal was definitely to capture my own feelings. I guess my two main thoughts regarding "why cake?" are:

- The "it's just cake, who cares" feels kind of like the response I imagine I'd get if I tried to explain my thoughts and feelings (in actual terms, not metaphorically) to most cis people. (And to be clear, I am in no way intending to be critical of your response!) Like, sure, there are definitely cis people who's gender is a large part of their identity, but I feel like the average person doesn't think about it that much. You'd get some version of "I am X, what's to think about?" or "why are you so obsessed with gender?" I certainly don't think my metaphor would be useful at all in trying to explain these feelings to someone who hasn't had them.
- There's this part of me, the doubting, scared, maybe internally transphobic part that's asking similar questions. "Why am I so obsessed with this? You have lots of things going for you, why does it matter?" And it's like, using something trivial like the flavor of cake I'm able to recognize and acknowledge this part of me, while still in the end with "give me the fucking chocolate cake" I feel like I'm telling that part "shut the fuck up, this is actually important, this does matter," if that makes sense. Thank you so much for your response, and the link (I do like that metaphor as well), it gave me a lot more to think about!

In this reply, the contributor demonstrates an understanding and acceptance of the previous resistance, with the informal tone ("Haha, that's totally fair.") and the playful use of emojis (":P") suggesting that the comment was not perceived as face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1989). The contributor does not respond defensively despite the (presumably considerable) time it took to compose their metaphor which is 836 words long. Instead, they respond vulnerably, openly sharing their experience of dysphoria. This is perhaps indicative of a shared understanding and awareness that metaphors for dysphoria are not universal, but deeply personal.

The contributor writes two bullet points in which they defend their choice of source domain. They firstly emphasise that the triviality of the source domain was intentional, using the triviality of cake flavour to mirror how discussions of gender identity are often dismissed or undermined by cisgender audiences. They secondly emphasise the personal nature of their metaphor choice, highlighting that it was intended to capture their lived experience of inner conflict and self-doubt

as a result of internalised transphobia. Here, the contributor challenges their own doubts (“this does matter”) through humour.

The exchange ends with the constructive comment "Oh yeah that makes a lot of sense! I can totally see where you are coming from. :)" which signals a shift from resistance to understanding. This suggests that responses to metaphor are not fixed but can evolve as a result of open dialogue, clarification and reflection. In this case, an example that initially provoked resistance opened the floor to discussing different lived experience of dysphoria.

This demonstrates how the same metaphor can function differently for different individuals, producing extremely varied reactions. For the contributor, the cake flavour scenario captured an authentic experience of self-doubt, whereas for the commentor it depicted a deeply personal experience in a trivial or vague manner. This exemplifies the context-dependent nature of metaphor reception, which is shaped by one’s personal history and experiences. In addition, this interaction highlights how resistance does not have to be perceived as a negative phenomenon. When enacted through a reflective rather than a combative stance, resistance can create opportunities for dialogue that fosters mutual reflection. Additionally, it can build rapport and encourage social intimacy.

Limited Scope

Resistance focused on the limited scope of a metaphor concerns how a metaphor omits key aspects of the experience it seeks to represent. This type of resistance suggests that while a metaphor may capture some aspects of living with gender dysphoria, it simultaneously hides or excludes others. In addition to the idea that there is ‘something missing’ from the metaphor, there is also an implicit concern of trivialisation (which has links to the previous resistance category of *Vagueness*). More specifically, commentors suggest that by simplifying experiences of dysphoria, the metaphor risks minimising its seriousness. Such resistance is often linguistically signalled by phrases such as “miss”, “missing” or “leaves out”.

For example, in response to a metaphor comparing gender dysphoria to wearing shoes on the wrong feet, one contributor writes:

The only thing I'm missing is the internal struggle in combination with the social aspect.
Switching shoes doesn't impact the relationship with the love of my life 😊

The commentor explicitly states that the metaphor misses “the internal struggle” and the “social aspect of dysphoria” referring to how relationships (particularly familial or romantic relationships) can be affected after coming out as trans. While the metaphor is able to successfully capture the physical discomfort of gender dysphoria, it does not address the interpersonal and emotional costs of transitioning. The contributor’s use of a smiling emoji (😊) potentially signals that their evaluation is intended to be constructive as opposed to confrontational.

The act of switching shoes is straightforward and inconsequential, it is not a profound transformative process. In this way, the metaphor fails to capture the risk and sacrifice that can accompany transitioning. The commentor juxtaposes “switching shoes” with the potential loss of the “love of [their] life” perhaps to draw attention to the personal stakes of transition – an aspect which the metaphor does not address. The contributor explicitly acknowledges what they believe is missing from the metaphor, suggesting that it is important to not only capture the physical dimension of dysphoria but also its social and relational dimensions.

The limited scope category directly demonstrates how metaphors oftentimes offer only a partial representation of an experience, and to some individuals this partial representation is acceptable, whereas to others it is reductive or even misleading.

Mappings Do Not Work in Reality

Some contributors resisted the connecting premise of a metaphor by challenging whether source-target mappings could plausibly work in reality. In such cases, the resistance focused on the metaphor’s real-world logic rather than its entailments.

For example, one contributor proposed the following VEHICLE metaphor which compares having the incorrect sex hormones to putting the wrong type of fuel in a vehicle:

Mine is for hormone therapy: imagine you have a diesel motor and you put gasoline in the tank. The motor will still run, though not very well. But when you put diesel fuel in the tank, the motor runs much better - the way it was designed to. Going onto hormone therapy is getting the correct fuel for your brain and body; they operated using the old hormones, but they really work much better on the correct hormones.

Another contributor resists this by questioning the real-world validity of the metaphor's premise:

Don't diesel engines explode if you run gasoline through them?

Here, the commentor evaluates the metaphor literally, focusing on how engines function in reality rather than engaging with its intended message. The metaphor is seemingly proposed to capture the idea of a mismatch that can be corrected, presenting hormone therapy as a solution to dysphoria. However, the response focuses on the metaphor's plausibility in reality. The commentor resists the source domain used by suggesting that the original contributor's assumptions about the source domain are wrong.

Another example of resistance targeting the accuracy of the metaphorical mapping is from the TECHNOLOGY domain:

If you're Mac software stuck in Windows hardware. You can't change you, the software, so you need to try and change the hardware, outward appearance, you're in to run properly.

To which another commentor replies:

the problem is bootcamp on macOS actually lets that work, and not even emulation, but actually running windows

Again, the focus is on the accuracy of the mapping in literal terms. The commentor highlights the technical inconsistency of the comparison rather than engaging with its intended message of a mismatch between software and hardware.

Both responses demonstrate a form of literal resistance whereby contributors evaluate figurative expressions in terms of factual accuracy or plausibility, rather than considering their conceptual fit or emotional resonance. Such examples of resistance could reflect the high-stakes nature of metaphor use in this context – there is a possibility that metaphors for transition and dysphoria could circulate widely online. As a result, there is a risk of misinterpretation. Therefore, resistance could be used as a protective measure used to prevent misunderstandings.

8.2.2. Locutional Resistance

There are three instances of locutional resistance in the dataset, falling under the subcategory lack of clarity.

Lack of Clarity

Resistance focused on a metaphor's lack of clarity argues that a metaphor is difficult to comprehend or does not establish clear mappings between the source and target domains. This type of resistance is focused less on explicit disagreement with the metaphor and more on its inaccessibility – the reader cannot easily tell what the metaphor is trying to communicate.

This differs from vagueness, where a metaphor is resisted because it is too generic to capture the nuances of the target domain. Vagueness focuses on a lack of detail or relevance, whereas lack of clarity focuses on the difficulty of understanding the intended mapping.

For example, in relation to a JOB metaphor for dysphoria, one commentor writes:

I'm not sure that's a good analogy, I have trouble following that one, and I'm a trans women!

The phrase “I have trouble following that one” suggests that the intended mappings are not clear. The commentor is perhaps unsure how the JOB source domain relates to the target domain of gender dysphoria. The commentor indexes their identity “and I’m a trans [woman]” in order to suggest that if anyone were to understand the metaphor it would be her. This presents it as extremely inaccessible to those without lived experience.

In other cases, a lack of clarity is evident through interrogatives. In response to a shoes on the wrong feet scenario, one commentor writes:

I don't really get it. What do the shoes represent? What do new shoes represent? Why can't you just wear the new shoes the right way? Or the old shoes the right way? Is there a difference between that. This sounds like a really convoluted way of saying: "Gender Dysphoria is a discomfort that is alleviated by transition, but not by only being gender nonconforming. (...)

Here the series of questions reflect the commentor attempting to work out the intended metaphorical mappings between shoes and gender dysphoria. The verb “represent” in formulations such as “what do the shoes represent?” highlights that it is the correspondences between the two domains that are unclear, as the commentor attempts to map the source onto the target.

Furthermore, the commentor describes the proposed metaphor as a “convoluted way of saying: gender dysphoria is a discomfort (...)” which implies that rather than making an inaccessible experience accessible, as metaphors often do, here the metaphor makes the experience even more inaccessible. In addition, this comment suggests that the intended meaning could be conveyed in a much more direct or concise manner. Thus, it could serve as an argument against the use of figurative language to discuss gender dysphoria (for a further discussion of this phenomenon, see 8.3.4 *General Resistance*).

Resistance targeting a metaphor's lack of clarity demonstrates how metaphors which demand a lot of processing effort could potentially risk alienating their audience and/or obscuring the experience they aim to represent.

8.2.3. Experiential Resistance

I introduced the category of experiential resistance (n=2) into the framework to capture instances in which resistance arises from a disconnection between the metaphor and the intended audience's knowledge or experience. In such cases, a metaphor may work in linguistic and conceptual terms yet fail to resonate on a personal level. Alternatively, experiential resistance may arise when the audience lacks sufficient familiarity with the metaphor's source domain to meaningfully engage with it.

Lack of Personal Resonance

One contributor expressed resistance to a metaphor that they could not personally relate to. They expressed that while the mapping was successful linguistically and conceptually, it failed to resonate with their own lived experience. This occurred in response to the following scenario in which a contributor compares being trans to being gifted a motorcycle when you have always wanted a car:

Idk about favorite but here's one I heard recently that I thought was kinda cool.
Being trans is like being given a motorcycle even though you've always wanted a car. Everyone tells you to be thankful for your motorcycle and tells you how great it is, ignoring your anxieties and dislikes of it. You're expected to learn how to drive it and you never get a chance to drive a car yourself. Coming out is telling everyone you're getting a car despite their objections. Those first few months consist of learning to drive with a junk car that you love because you're just happy you finally have a car instead. It has problems but it's a massive step up and makes you happy. Being several years and having whatever surgeries you may or may not want is getting to have your dream car.

To which another commentor resisted as follows:

like this one, but I also really like riding my motorbike. so I guess this one doesn't work for me xD

Here, the resistance is playful as signalled through the use of emoji (“xD”) and face-saving mitigation “like this one”. However, the commentor nevertheless resists the metaphor by suggesting that they will not reuse it (“I guess this one doesn't work for me”). This resistance seems to be based on a literal interpretation of the metaphor. As the commentor literally “[likes] riding [their] motorbike” they cannot imagine using the metaphor. This exemplifies the individual and idiosyncratic nature of metaphor use, demonstrating how personal experience shapes the extent to which a metaphor resonates with its audience.

This subcategory provides further support for previous literature which has suggested that a metaphor's source domain should be relatable in order for it to be effective (e.g., Thibodeau, Hendricks, & Boroditsky, 2017; Thibodeau et al., 2019 in Flusberg, Holmes et al., 2024). This form of resistance can be considered the inverse of the *Relatability of Source Domain* category identified under metaphor endorsement.

Lack of Familiarity with the Source Domain

Experiential resistance also arises when contributors express limited familiarity with a source domain. In one thread, the original poster asked for a metaphor to help their parents understand the experience of being trans. One contributor proposed a software metaphor belonging to the TECHNOLOGY source domain:

It is like having the wrong software for your hardware. Severity can be as small as minor bugs to out right crashing.

To which the original poster responded:

I like this one, but they are not really computer people so they might not get the analogy fully. I can see what your going for with it, so I will keep this idea in mind thanks.

Here, the original poster begins by personally endorsing the metaphor (“I like this one”) before resisting it on the basis that the intended audience (their parents) lacks sufficient familiarity with the source domain. This illustrates how experiential resistance operates not only at the level of personal resonance or familiarity, but also in relation to an intended audience’s perceived knowledge and experience.

Both forms of experiential resistance demonstrate how metaphor reuse is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. In the case of ‘lack of personal resonance’, the comment suggests that a metaphor should align with one’s identity and lived experience in order for it to be taken up. In the case of ‘lack of familiarity with the source domain’, the metaphor must be sufficiently familiar and accessible to its intended audience in order for it to be considered effective. This is linked to the communicative purpose of the thread – to develop a metaphor that those without first-hand experience of dysphoria can understand and potentially relate to.

8.2.4. General Resistance

I incorporated general resistance to metaphor for a given target domain into the model. In the Reddit dataset, there were thirteen instances of commentors resisting the use of figurative language to talk about gender dysphoria.

Resistance to Figurative Language for a Given Target Domain

Resistance to figurative language for a given target domain here refers to instances where contributors challenge or reject the use of figurative language to talk about gender dysphoria. This differs from the previous forms of resistance, which typically target a specific source domain. Here, resistance is focused on whether figurative language should be used at all to talk about gender dysphoria on the basis that it is unnecessary, futile, or misleading.

For example, one contributor resists figurative language by arguing that literal language (and experiences) can be used to talk about dysphoria:

Men can grow breasts, gynecomastia, and women can grow beards, hirtutism. These are recognized medical conditions that people get treatment for because they result in their body not aligning with their gender identity, despite not posing any other health risks. We don't need analogies, cis people can experience gender dysphoria, it just lines up with most people's expectations, while trans people's dysphoria falls foul of them

The commentor argues that real-life medical conditions provide a more accurate account of gender dysphoria, and as a result "we don't need analogies". They suggest that framing dysphoria through experiences cis people have encountered or may have personally experienced is more effective. Thus, the commentor privileges shared embodied experience over shared metaphorical understanding. This could be considered an attempt to normalise dysphoria by aligning it with recognised medical conditions, rather than 'othering' by describing it in terms of an unrelated source domain. However, the commentor acknowledges that gender dysphoria is not taken as seriously as the listed medical conditions as it "falls foul" of people's expectations.

Some examples of general criticism to metaphor appear ironic (cf. 'ironic resistance', Gibbs & Siman, 2021), as contributors resist figurative language then proceed to make use of it. This is the case in response to a post where the original poster, Ben, explains that his mother described his transition as: "'Deadname is dying in ICU, and "Ben" (my chosen name) is desperately running around trying to pull the plugs and kill her child."'. The original poster (Ben) then asks what analogies he can use to help his mother understand. A commentor replies to his post as follows:

I'm sorry you're struggling with an unsupportive parent. It's brutal having to battle this while you're trying to get your own self in order, too. I'm going to go against the grain on this one. For context, I've been transitioning/transitioned for over 7 years at this point, and my own unsupportive mother eventually revealed herself to be the dictionary definition of narcissistic personality disorder, so that was fun. Assuming your mother isn't a narcissist, she's just selfish and dramatic, I can tell you this with absolute certainty: no analogy will help. To pull one myself: pulling up analogies here is like pissing into an ocean of piss. You're literally letting her goad you into a rap battle. Analogies are a great

way of beating around the bush and purposefully being indirect, and being indirect (and, on a similar note, "dropping hints") is a great way to make absolutely no progress at all when someone is not completely receptive. What you need in this situation is to remind yourself that YOU are in control here. YOU are in the driver's seat. Everyone else, literally even your parents, are passengers in this journey and they can either earn their place in the front seat, get gagged and sent to the back, or left on the side of the road if they start trying to push buttons. The most important thing for YOU to do right here is not to engage in said rap battle. She doesn't understand because she doesn't WANT to understand. She is trying to bully you back into the closet, not get pretty words out of you. (...)

Although the contributor explicitly critiques figurative language ("no analogy will help"), they nevertheless employ a series of creative metaphors to express their frustration towards Ben's mother ("pissing into an ocean of piss", "rap battle"). The commentor demonstrates skilful metalinguistic awareness as they reject Ben's mother's TRANSITION IS DEATH metaphor yet make use of figurative language in a seemingly ironic way to convey their emotional stance. Research has found that metaphor, in particular creative metaphor, plays a crucial role in expressing emotions due to its evaluative function (Fuoli, Littlemore & Turner, 2021; Littlemore, Turner & Tuck, 2023). The commentor's strong reaction could be a result of various factors including their personal experiences with their own mother or the expectation which is often placed on trans people to act as educators and manage other people's emotions before their own. In addition, the commentor rejects figurative language on the basis that it is "indirect", suggesting that it cannot adequately capture the experience.

Their lengthy response (751 words in total) demonstrates support, as the commentor shares their own experience of lacking familial support. This highlights the importance of online communities, particularly for members of the LGBTQIA+ community, as they are key sources of emotional social support (e.g., Selkie et al., 2020; Cipolletta et al., 2017; Avalos, 2024). Such spaces are particularly necessary for those who lack support offline. Online communities provide a place where a formerly largely invisible geographically dispersed population can bond with others who share similar or comparable experiences (Pearce, 2018, p. 39).

Another commentor shows their support of this stance:

I actually agree with the commenter who has a lot of good info about setting boundaries and not playing this analogy game that your mother seems fixated on

They encourage the original poster not to come up with their own metaphor to help their mother understand, which was the purpose of the thread, but instead use literal language to communicate their feelings. The idea of “playing the analogy game” evokes the image of a tit-for-tat exchange. Here, refusing to make use of metaphor becomes an act of boundary-setting – it demonstrates a refusal to acknowledge metaphors that misrepresent and/or invalidate trans experience. It also represents a means of controlling how one’s experiences are framed.

This form of resistance demonstrates how metaphor is not always considered a useful tool for shared meaning-making which bridges gaps in understanding. For these contributors it is viewed as unnecessary and indirect. This reflects broader discourses around the limits of using metaphor to talk about highly sensitive or difficult experiences (e.g., Sontag, 1978), where metaphor is seen as potentially distorting or obscuring.

8.2.5. Resistance Summary

To date, there has been limited research into what causes resistance to metaphor. Gibbs and Siman (2021) suggested that metaphors could be rejected based on “their sensory-motor components [...] their emotional valence, cultural implications, or their metaphorical nature altogether (in preference for literal language)” (p. 671). Van Poppel and Pilgrim (2023) and Declercq and van Poppel (2024) proposed that metaphors may be resisted along propositional, locutional, personal, and situational dimensions. This analysis has expanded the current understanding of metaphor resistance and found other factors that trigger resistance, including additional subcategories of propositional and locutional resistance in addition to experiential and general forms of resistance.

In addition, it should be acknowledged that the commentators that resist metaphors do so within explicitly metalinguistic threads. Thus, it is likely that they are metaphor aware. This aligns with Porto's (2024) finding that metaphor awareness is a key factor that allows speakers to choose their own metaphors and resist conventional perspectives, allowing them to convey their own views on a topic (p. 177).

8.3. Evaluation Frequencies

In addition to exploring the ways in which certain metaphors were endorsed and resisted, it is also fruitful to consider which source domains elicited the most engagement from commentators. Therefore, this section will provide an overview of the source domains that received the highest levels of evaluation the dataset, providing insight into which domains were judged to be more or less successful in representing gender dysphoria.

In addition to providing raw frequencies, this analysis employs descriptive rather than inferential statistics. Several metaphors originated from posts written by the same contributor, meaning that data points cannot be treated as independent of each other. Consequently, inferential statistics assuming independence, such as chi-square or Fisher's exact test, are inappropriate. Mixed-effects models, such as mixed-effect Poisson regression with post and participant as random effects, were also deemed unsuitable given the relatively small sample sizes. Descriptive statistics therefore provide the most transparent way to report evaluation of the source domains found in this dataset.

Table 15 presents the frequencies of the three different endorsement types (generic endorsement, justified endorsement, and metaphor shifting) according to source domain. Source domain frequency refers to how often users used a given source domain to talk about gender dysphoria, whereas the endorsement frequencies capture how other contributors positively evaluated these metaphors, through generic endorsement, justified endorsement, or metaphor shifting. As these frequencies represent different levels of discourse (metaphor production versus reception), they have not been statistically combined but are presented together in order to be interpreted comparatively.

Table 15. Frequencies of endorsement types across source domains

Source Domain	Source Domain Frequency	Generic Endorsement	Justified Endorsement	Metaphor Shifting	Total Endorsements
FOOD/DRINK	24	18	4	7	29
CLOTHING	40	2	4	6	12
JOURNEY	10	7	2	2	11
HEALTH/ILLNESS	23	5	0	3	8
TECHNOLOGY	13	5	0	2	7
SPLIT SELF	14	2	1	2	5
HANDEDNESS	9	1	4	0	4
SECRET IDENTITY	4	2	0	1	3
JOB	9	1	2	0	3
METAMORPHOSIS/EVOLUTION	4	2	0	1	3
VEHICLE/WRONG FUEL	8	1	0	1	2
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE	15	1	0	1	2
ENTRAPMENT	5	1	0	0	1
TOYS AND GAMES	5	1	0	0	1
MUTATION	5	1	0	0	1
UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE	9	1	0	0	1
TREE	1	0	1	0	1
GUN	1	1	0	0	1
SWICHTED AT BIRTH	1	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	200	53	16	27	96

As shown in Table 15, some source domains were endorsed at a higher frequency than they were proposed. This is the case for FOOD/DRINK and JOURNEY, suggesting that these domains resonated strongly with other contributors. In contrast, although the domains of CLOTHING and HEALTH/ILLNESS were among the most frequently proposed, they were endorsed much less frequently overall. A small number of one-off source domains including those comparing gender dysphoria to a tree growing over time, owning a fin grip rifle when you would like to own an assault rifle, and being switched at birth received positive evaluations, suggesting that contributors were receptive to more novel metaphors.

Table 16 presents resistance frequencies by source domain (with the exception of resistance to *figurative language for gender dysphoria* as this is not targeted at a particular source domain).

Table 16. Frequencies of resistance across source domains

Source Domain	Source Domain Frequency	Total Resistance
FOOD/DRINK	24	2
CLOTHING	40	8
JOURNEY	10	0
HEALTH/ILLNESS	23	0
TECHNOLOGY	13	1
SPLIT SELF	14	2
HANDEDNESS	9	0
SECRET IDENTITY	4	0
JOB	9	2
METAMORPHOSIS/EVOLUTION	4	0
VEHICLE/WRONG FUEL	8	2
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE	15	0
ENTRAPMENT	5	0
TOYS AND GAMES	5	0
MUTATION	5	0
UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE	9	0
TREE	1	0
GUN	1	0

SWICTHED AT BIRTH	1	0
MALFUNCTIONING PRODUCT	1	1
FOOTBALL TEAMS	1	1
FIGURATIVE LANG	N/A	13

Overall, the CLOTHING source domain received the most resistance. While this may be related to its high frequency, it also suggests that this source domain was perceived as problematic or lacking in a way that the other source domains were not. Despite their relatively high frequencies, JOURNEY and HEALTH/ILLNESS metaphors attracted no resistance, indicating agreement of their communicative potential.

When endorsement and resistance frequencies are considered together (Table 17), differences in engagement become clearer. The evaluation density, calculated as the total number of evaluations (endorsements + resistances) divided by the number of metaphors in that source domain (source domain frequency), was calculated to provide a measure of how much engagement each source domain received. For example, for the CLOTHING source domain, the evaluation density was calculated as follows: CLOTHING: $(12 + 8) / 40 = 0.5$.

Table 17. Combined endorsement and resistance frequencies

Source Domain	Source Domain Frequency	Total Endorsement	Total Resistance	Total Evaluations	Percentage Endorsement	Percentage Resistance	Evaluation Density
FOOD/DRINK	24	29	2	31	93.5%	6.5%	1.29
CLOTHING	40	12	8	20	60%	40%	0.5
JOURNEY	10	11	0	11	100%	0%	1.1
HEALTH/ILLNESS	23	8	0	8	100%	0%	0.35
TECHNOLOGY	13	7	1	8	87.5%	12.5%	0.62
SPLIT SELF	14	5	2	7	71.4%	28.6%	0.50
HANDEDNESS	9	4	0	4	100%	0%	0.44
SECRET IDENTITY	4	3	0	3	100%	0%	0.75
JOB	9	3	2	5	60%	40%	0.55
METAMORPHOSIS/ EVOLUTION	4	3	0	3	100%	0%	0.75
VEHICLE/WRONG FUEL	8	2	2	4	50%	50%	0.5
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE	15	2	0	2	100%	0%	0.13
ENTRAPMENT	5	1	0	1	100%	0%	0.2
TOYS AND GAMES	5	1	0	1	100%	0%	0.2
MUTATION	5	1	0	1	100%	0%	0.2
UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE	9	1	0	1	100%	0%	0.11
TREE	1	1	0	1	100%	0%	1
GUN	1	1	0	1	100%	0%	1

SWICTHED AT BIRTH	1	1	0	1	100%	0%	1
MALFUNCTIONIN G PRODUCT	1	0	1	1	0%	100%	1
FOOTBALL TEAMS	1	0	1	1	0%	100%	1
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE	-	0	13	13	0%	100%	N/A

Figure 15 visualises these relationships, illustrating the relative frequency of metaphor use by source domain, alongside the number of endorsement and resistance comments each source domain received.

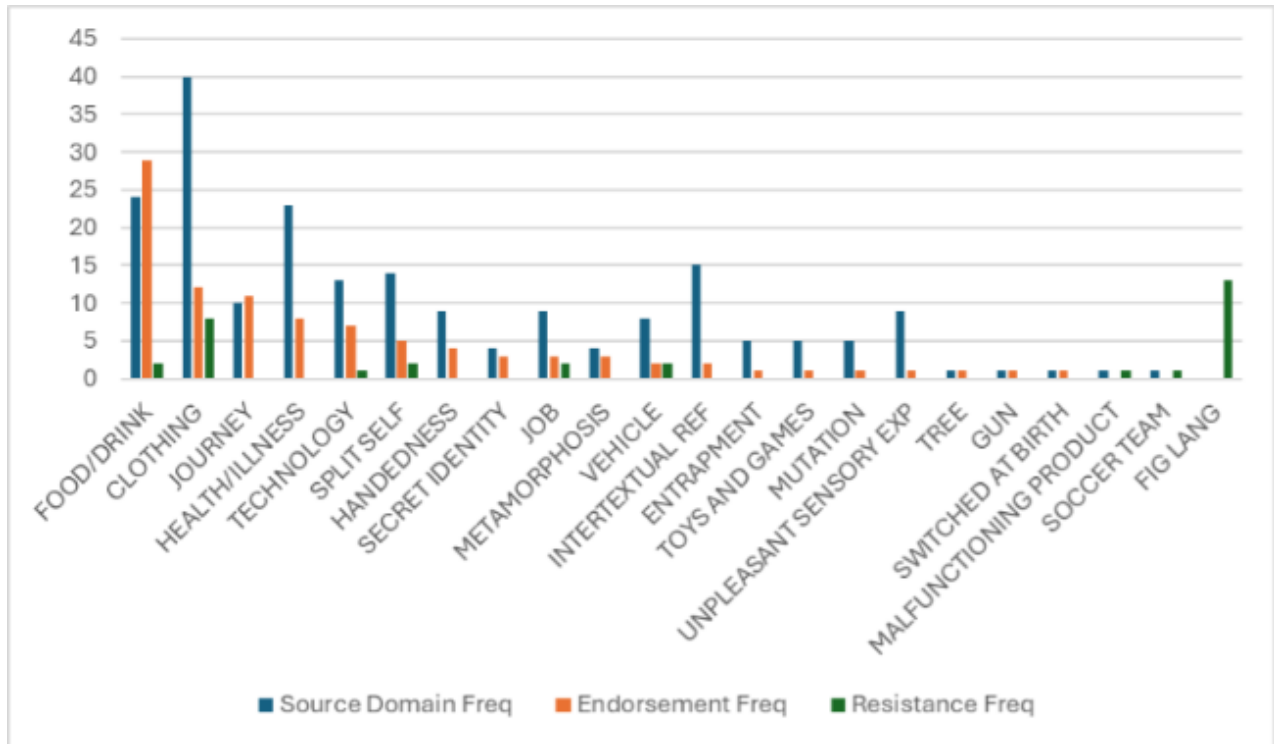


Figure 15. Source domain frequency with number of endorsement and resistance comments

Figure 15 shows that the FOOD/DRINK source domain was not only relatively frequent (n=24) but also frequently endorsed (93.5%), yielding the highest evaluation density (1.29). This indicates strong engagement with this domain, perhaps as a result of its accessibility and embodied nature. In contrast, CLOTHING metaphors were the most frequent (n=40) yet were more polarising, with forty per cent of evaluative responses expressing resistance. This suggests that although they are embodied and accessible, they have limited applicability to the target domain. The source domains of JOURNEY and HEALTH/ILLNESS, though less frequent, were consistently endorsed. This suggests that they were viewed as successful and effective in describing the physical symptoms of dysphoria and processes of transition and discovery respectively. Furthermore, despite occurring less frequently, TECHNOLOGY and SPLIT SELF metaphors received more mixed evaluation, though they received more endorsement overall. This relationship can be seen more

clearly in Figure 16 below which presents percentages of endorsement and resistance using 100% stacked bars to normalise values in each domain.

Resistance was most evident in comments challenging the use of figurative language to talk about gender dysphoria (100% resistance), highlighting discomfort with using metaphorical expressions altogether. This reflects broader discourses around the limits of using metaphor to talk about highly sensitive or difficult experiences (e.g., Sontag, 1978). It may also reflect long-standing negative views of metaphors more generally. Historically, metaphor has often been considered ornamental or even potentially deviant and misleading (Gibbs & Siman, 2021). Such scepticism of metaphor persists today – for example, with a quick online search one can find multiple Reddit threads expressing a dislike of metaphors, describing them as cringe, overly complicated, or a distraction from direct communication. These views are often based on some degree of misunderstanding, as users resist metaphors then continue to make use of them (cf. Gibbs & Siman, 2021, ironic resistance).

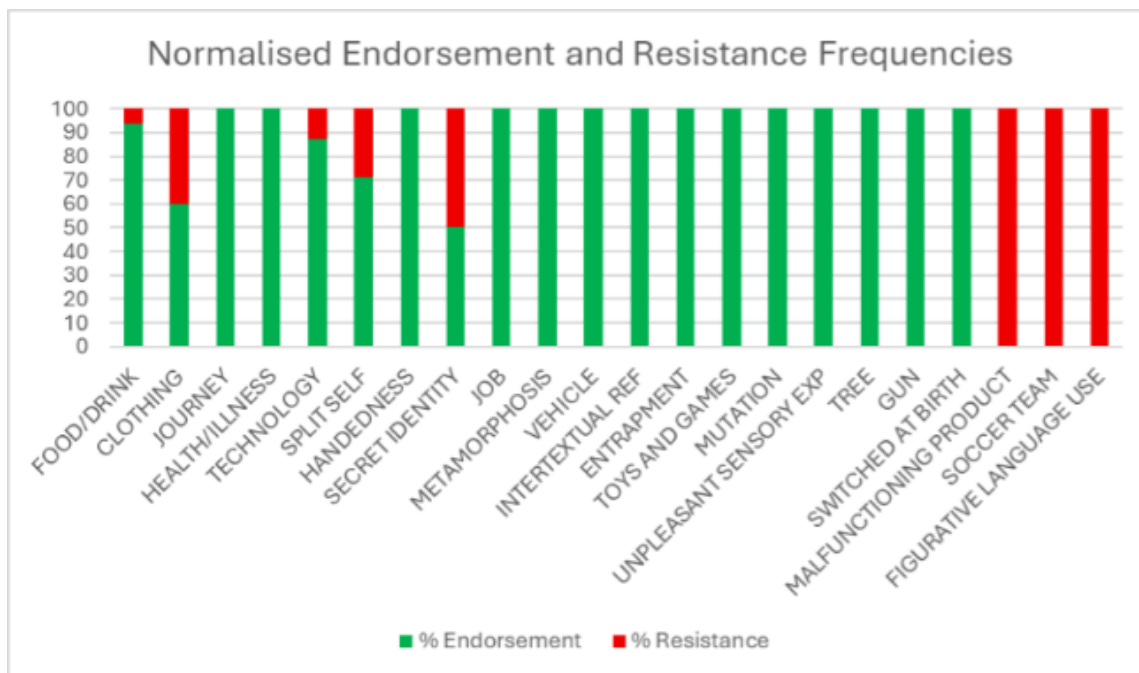


Figure 16. Normalised percentages of endorsement and resistance comments within each source domain displayed as 100% stacked bars

Overall, these findings demonstrate that endorsement and resistance were not evenly distributed across source domains. The relationship between accessibility, relatability and positive evaluation is not straightforward. While FOOD/DRINK and JOURNEY metaphors, both grounded in embodied experiences, were frequently endorsed, CLOTHING metaphors which are also concrete and embodied were more contested. This may be because CLOTHING evokes a more externalised or superficial form of embodiment. This does however suggest that factors beyond accessibility, relatability, and embodiment influence how metaphors for gender dysphoria are evaluated. Evaluation therefore is linked to the specific linguistic realisation of each source domain.

Furthermore, these findings demonstrate the predominance of endorsement across the dataset, evidencing the overall supportive nature of the subreddits in which comments were more frequently validated than resisted.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This thesis has explored the metaphors used to talk about gender dysphoria in response to metalinguistic prompts on Reddit. These metaphors emerged organically within peer-support subreddits, offering insight into how dysphoria is talked about by those with lived experience in a naturalistic context. While these discussions were situated in trans communities, they typically had the underlying purpose of making the experience intelligible to a cisgender audience. As such, they demonstrate awareness of the role of metaphor in making sense of difficult personal experiences.

In addition to examining how gender dysphoria is talked about and framed metaphorically, this research also investigated how community members evaluated the different metaphorical framings of the experience. This research considered how evaluation was performed linguistically in relation to previous evaluation frameworks (Cameron, 2008, 2010; Declercq & van Poppel, 2024). A distinction was made between explicit forms of evaluation, such as providing justification, and more implicit forms of evaluation, including metaphor reuse and development. In addition, the reasons why metaphors were endorsed and resisted were explored, offering valuable insight into the criteria used to judge a metaphor's effectiveness. This research therefore sheds light on the phenomenon of metaphor evaluation more generally.

This final chapter begins by summarising the key research findings and addressing the research questions posed in Chapter 1. It then reflects on the methodological and theoretical contributions of this research to metaphor theory and trans studies. Following this, the limitations of the research are outlined. Finally, this chapter concludes by reflecting on directions for future research and offering some closing remarks.

9.1. Summary of Research Findings

This thesis sought to address three research questions relating to metaphor production and evaluation.

9.1.1 Research Question One

The first research question concerned the source domains used to talk about gender dysphoria:

1. Which metaphorical source domains do transgender people use to talk about their lived experiences of gender dysphoria in response to metalinguistic prompts on Reddit and how do they frame the experience?

Across the dataset 230 metaphorical expressions belonging to thirty-four different source domains were identified. These included:

- CLOTHING (40);
- FOOD/DRINK (24);
- HEALTH/ILLNESS (23);
- INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE (15);
- SPLIT SELF (14);
- TECHNOLOGY (13);
- JOURNEY (10);
- HANDEDNESS (9);
- JOB (9);
- UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE (9);
- VEHICLE (8);
- PUBLIC EMBARRASSMENT (5);
- ENTRAPMENT (5);
- TOYS AND GAMES (6);
- MUTATION (5);
- METAMORPHOSIS/EVOLUTION (4);
- SECRET IDENTITY (4);
- ANIMALS (3);
- MISMATCH/MISPLACEMENT (3);
- COLOUR (3);
- FOOTBALL TEAMS (2);
- NAGGING THOUGHT (2);
- HOMESICKNESS (2);
- WEIGHT (2);

- OTHER (10).

Two source domains previously identified in research on metaphor and trans lived experiences (Lederer, 2015, 2019), JOURNEY and SPLIT SELF (also referred to as DIVIDED SELF), were also identified here. This suggests that they are conventionally used to talk about gender-related distress. This is perhaps unsurprising given the wide scope of both JOURNEY and SPLIT SELF metaphors.

JOURNEY metaphors can “apply to any target domain that is purposive and proceeds through some stages” (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014, p. 45). They can be used to capture progress, difficulties, and choices (Dancygier & Sweetster, 2014). As such, they lend themselves well to experiences such as gender dysphoria, transitioning, and coming out. Similarly, SPLIT SELF as a category is highly schematic and can be applied to a wide range of experiences. In relation to trans identities, SPLIT SELF metaphors take on a new layer of meaning as many trans people feel as though their “‘real’ inner self” does not align with their “‘exterior” gender presentation (Lederer, 2015, p. 107). Trans subjects often conceptualise the self as residing in the mind rather than the body (Austin et al., 2022). This demonstrates how the mind and body are not viewed as two mutually exclusive but equally valuable aspects of the self, rather the mind takes precedence (Austin et al., 2022). Thus, when applied to the target domain of trans lived experiences, the scope of SPLIT SELF metaphors is extended.

However, in contrast to Lederer’s (2015, 2019) research, the metaphorical linguistic expressions belonging to the JOURNEY and SPLIT SELF domains in the current dataset are notably more novel. This is likely attributable to the differing data types and target domains. While Lederer’s (2015, 2019) research focuses on spoken narratives about coming out and transitioning, the present research considers asynchronous forum comments focused specifically on metaphors for gender dysphoria. Online comments can be more carefully planned and edited as contributors have time to reflect and revise their responses. Nevertheless, the fact that the same two source domains were identified in both datasets demonstrates their salience (and potential conventionality) in relation to trans lived experiences.

The source domains identified in the current dataset can be situated along a series of clines, rather than being treated as discrete, mutually exclusive categories. These clines help to capture how different metaphors foreground (and background) different aspects of the dysphoric experience.

For example, some domains are more personal and embodied (e.g., CLOTHING, HEALTH/ILLNESS, HANDEDNESS, and UNPLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCE) whereas others are more external, focusing on feelings that arise from the reactions of others (e.g., PUBLIC EMBARRASSMENT and FOOTBALL TEAM). Source domains rooted in bodily experience align more closely with body dysphoria - negative feelings towards the body resulting from a dissonance of assigned and experienced gender which can include feelings of unease, disgust or hatred towards the body (Cooper et al., 2020). On the other hand, source domains focused more on how one's identity is perceived by others are more closely related to social dysphoria which arises from a mismatch between self-perception and social perception. In PUBLIC EMBARRASSMENT and FOOTBALL TEAM metaphors, for example, it is the act of being seen and negatively judged by others that causes discomfort. This demonstrates, as Cooper et al., (2020) observe, that definitions of dysphoria should be two-fold, encompassing both bodily and social dimensions.

A second continuum contrasts metaphors that are humanising with those that dehumanise or objectify. Some domains focus on a profound sense of embodied distress or discomfort (e.g., CLOTHING and HEALTH/ILLNESS) whilst others compare a person to a VEHICLE or an item of TECHNOLOGY. In these latter cases, the self and body are presented as two separate entities, and it is implied that there is disconnect between them. Oftentimes, the resulting 'malfunction' is presented as something which can be fixed. Dehumanising metaphors may reveal a sense of dissociation or detachment from the physical self – these are common symptoms of body dysphoria (Cooper et al., 2020). Humanising, embodied metaphors also focus on symptoms of body dysphoria, though they tend to focus more on acute feelings of physical discomfort and distress.

Another continuum includes static versus more dynamic construals of gender dysphoria. Some source domains present dysphoria as a fixed state of being (e.g., HANDEDNESS, ENTRAPMENT), depicting the discomfort as enduring and inescapable. In contrast, other domains compare

dysphoria to processes of transformation (e.g., JOURNEY, METAMORPHOSIS, MUTATION), suggesting that dysphoria fluctuates in intensity over time. The latter are typically used to describe how dysphoria lessens as one takes steps to affirm one's gender.

A final continuum contrasts source domains that carry a potential risk of pathologisation with those that are more neutral. Domains such as HEALTH/ILLNESS and MUTATION may legitimise dysphoria through a medical framing, yet they could also pathologize it. In contrast JOURNEY metaphors are less 'loaded'. They are also more agentive, foregrounding personal choice and progress. As such, they grant less power to external agents such as medical professionals. Interestingly, *Positive Representation* is one of the dimensions commentators refer to when evaluating metaphor use - they value metaphors which do not relate dysphoria to sickness or pain. This demonstrates that contributors are aware of metaphor's potential to have harmful framing effects.

In addition to variability across domains, there is also considerable within-domain variability. For example, within the FOOD/DRINK domain, contributors compare gender dysphoria to life-threatening allergies to express severe dysphoria and to preferences to express milder forms of dysphoria. Similarly, in the HEALTH/ILLNESS domain, gender dysphoria is compared to both low-risk medical conditions, such as headaches, and to more acute or serious illnesses such as tumours. This demonstrates how the same domain can be used to provide different perspectives on the same topic.

As the above discussion demonstrates, these domains present diverse and often contrasting depictions of gender dysphoria. Nevertheless, several overarching themes span the domains, suggesting that there are some elements that are shared across various experiences of dysphoria.

Firstly, many of the domains involve some form of binary contrast. Though this is not a gender binary (male versus female) as one might initially expect, but a correctness binary, where one option is presented as correct, comfortable or desirable while the other is presented as incorrect, uncomfortable or painful. This is consistent with various definitions of gender dysphoria which involve an "incongruence" or "mismatch" (e.g., Stryker, 2017; Cooper et al., 2020; NHS, 2020). In many metaphors, the mismatch is captured in terms of a binary where one alternative is right and the other is wrong.

This binary also allows contributors to convey the idea of a delayed realisation; they often come to realise that their initial option was incorrect only after trying an alternative option. This shows how gender dysphoria (or the source of it) may not always be immediately recognised.

The theme of initial unawareness recurs throughout the entirety of the dataset. For example, within the FOOD/DRINK source domain, individuals describe scenarios in which they initially drink dairy milk before realising they are lactose intolerant, similarly in the HANDEDNESS domain individuals describe writing with their non-dominant hand before recognising that something feels wrong. In each case, the metaphors highlight how dysphoria may emerge gradually, through the contrast between an initial state and one that feels more aligned or authentic.

Secondly, many metaphors position transness as marked. For example, being trans is wearing shoes that rub, wearing dirty clothing, drinking saltwater, or writing with one's left hand. The marked variant is often negative. This is not to say that the contributors themselves believe that being trans is bad, however they may use these metaphors to capture how being trans is more difficult than being cis. This difficulty can result from feelings of physical embodied discomfort or in some cases external opinions (e.g., being left-handed is wrong).

Thirdly, contributors typically select intersubjectively accessible areas of experience that balance relatability and novelty. This may reflect the underlying pedagogical purpose of the threads: to develop metaphors that render gender dysphoria intelligible to cisgender audiences. Across the dataset, the majority of metaphors could be considered creative. Creativity combines 'novelty' with 'appropriateness' (Carter, 2015). That is, metaphors that are original but fulfil their communitive purpose; contributors achieve this in different ways. In some cases, they draw on relatively conventional source domains, such as CLOTHING, but introduce an implausible element to capture the gravitas of gender dysphoria. In other cases, they select less conventional domains, such as the FOOD/DRINK domain to capture more familiar experiences (e.g., an internal/external mismatch). This novelty may result from the asynchronous nature of the threads as comments can be carefully crafted. Furthermore, contributors are perhaps more likely to comment if they feel they are offering something new, different or interesting to the discussions. In addition, the

Reddit platform itself may shape the responses. Subreddits are interest-based communities, therefore, users are likely to be invested in the topic around which the community is organised. As such Reddit may be an environment where users are willing to spend time producing detailed responses. The sensitive nature of gender dysphoria as a topic may further motivate contributors to carefully consider their responses.

These findings demonstrate that gender dysphoria is far from the homogeneous experience depicted in many diagnostic manuals and in healthcare materials. For example, the NHS website which has not been updated since 2020 describes gender dysphoria as “a sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity” and “[this] sense of unease or dissatisfaction may be so intense it can lead to depression and anxiety and have a harmful impact on daily life”. Thus, the NHS definition focuses primarily on body dysphoria and does not refer to social dysphoria which arises from how a person is perceived, misgendered, or stigmatised by others. The varied experiences of gender dysphoria evident in the dataset offer a much more nuanced understanding of this experience, demonstrating how multiple perspectives from those with lived experiences should inform definitions and resources.

9.1.2. Research Question Two

The second research question this thesis addresses relates to the ways in which the identified metaphors are evaluated.

2. How are these metaphors evaluated by other users?

- i. In what ways are metaphorical source domains endorsed through user comments?**
- ii. In what ways are metaphorical source domains resisted through user comments?**

Endorsement

Across the dataset, ninety-six instances of endorsement were identified (based on comments; upvotes were not analysed). Building on previous frameworks (Cameron, 2008, 2010; Mathieson et al., 2015), three broad categories of positive evaluation were identified: generic endorsement,

metaphor shifting, and justified endorsement. These categories capture not only how metaphors are positively evaluated but also shed light on the interpersonal dynamics of the analysed trans subreddits.

Generic Endorsement

A total of fifty-three comments positively evaluated a metaphor without offering further elaboration or justification. This category aligns closely with Mathieson et al.'s (2015) praise of/agreement with a metaphor category. Although brief, these responses signal support and personal engagement with a comment more than an upvote alone. This provides evidence for the supportive nature of the subreddits and demonstrates that members are not simply consuming content passively but are actively engaging. This is likely because members of these communities have a personal interest in the topic, understand how difficult talking about it can be, and they are therefore motivated to be supportive. More broadly, such subreddits often operate as spaces for relationship-building, particularly as members of the trans community may be geographically dispersed and may lack accessible offline communities (Pearce, 2018). Generic endorsement therefore functions as a form of solidarity and affirmation.

Metaphor Shifting

Metaphor shifting was the second most frequent form of endorsement with twenty-six occurrences. This phenomenon was explored using Cameron's (2008, 2010) model of metaphor shifting, focusing specifically on responses that repeated, rephrased or developed a metaphor in a way that is congruent with its original use. Cameron's (2008, 2010) model includes three types of metaphor shifting: vehicle development, vehicle redeployment, and literalisation. In the dataset, vehicle development was the most frequent, comprising repetition (n=3); relexicalization (n=2); contrast (n=1) and a notably high frequency of explication (n=19). Vehicle redeployment was also present though infrequent (n=2), while no clear-cut instances of literalisation were identified.

The high frequency of metaphor shifting, particularly explication, demonstrates the collaborative nature of metaphor use in these subreddits. Unlike generic endorsement, which requires only a

brief acknowledgement, metaphor shifting requires contributors to actively engage with the metaphor. Therefore, it takes considerable time, effort and involvement.

Metaphor shifting revealed how contributors adapted metaphors to more closely align with their own lived experiences. It was also used to achieve particular rhetorical functions, such as generating humour. For example, contributors developed scenarios in an extremely hyperbolic or exaggerated manner. Metaphor shifting was also used to signal solidarity by mocking transphobic arguments and emphasising shared frustrations.

Overall, the presence of metaphor shifting shows how contributors work together with the shared goal of developing a good metaphor for gender dysphoria. The high level of engagement metaphor shifting requires signals the vested interest that members of these communities have in producing explanations that cis people can understand. This may be because they feel a responsibility to educate others. Alternatively, it may be important to develop a good metaphor for this experience due to the frustration that can arise when gender dysphoria is misunderstood or misconstrued.

Justified Endorsement

The third most frequent form of endorsement was justified endorsement (17 occurrences). This involved positive evaluation of a metaphor supported by a reason or explanation. Little previous research has systematically analysed why users positively evaluate particular metaphors. Therefore, by exploring contributors' reasoning, this study provides new insight into the criteria that inform metaphor success.

Several motivations for endorsement were identified. Firstly, contributors emphasised the relatability of a source domain (n=8), either in a personal sense or more generally, suggesting that metaphors were valued when they resonated with their own experiences or were likely to be accessible to others. Secondly, metaphors were endorsed when they were judged to effectively capture a particular aspect of the dysphoric experience (n=7), such as social dysphoria or discomfort that is difficult to determine the cause of. Thirdly, contributors valued the simplicity of metaphors (n=3). Finally, contributors responded positively to metaphors that offered a positive, non-pathologising representation of dysphoria (n=1), avoiding associations with illness.

Though these findings are specific to the topic of gender dysphoria, they reveal broader criteria people use to judge metaphors, namely their relatability, accuracy, clarity, and positive entailments.

Taken together, these three forms of endorsement reveal different ways in which contributors evaluated and engaged with metaphors within the subreddits. Generic endorsement provides a brief display of solidarity and affirmation, reinforcing the supportive nature of these spaces. Metaphor shifting demonstrates a deeper level of engagement, showing how contributors are involved in a collaborative process of meaning-making. Justified endorsement provides insight into the criteria users draw on when endorsing metaphors, revealing what makes a “good” metaphor for gender dysphoria from the perspective of those with lived experience. The metalinguistic nature of this dataset makes it particularly well-suited to examining these practises as contributors openly reflect on which metaphors resonate with them and why.

Resistance

Research question two also considered metaphor resistance. Resistance was less frequent than endorsement, with thirty-one occurrences across the dataset. Resistance refers to comments that expressed a negative evaluation of a previous metaphor or a negative evaluation of the use of figurative language more generally. Importantly, all instances of resistance were accompanied by justification and resistance was frequently mitigated through the use of face-work strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This suggests that in the analysed subreddits resistance is a constructive process rather than combative one.

Resistance was categorised using Declercq and van Poppel’s (2024) framework for metaphor evaluation which I adapted to capture the nuances of the dataset. Following van Poppel and Pilgrim (2023), Declercq and van Poppel (2024) distinguish between propositional, locutional, personal, and situational resistance. Only propositional and locutional resistance were evident in the dataset. I developed additional subcategories within these two levels and extended the model to include experiential and general forms of resistance. Thus, the data included forms of resistance that have not been documented in previous research.

Metaphors were resisted along the following dimensions. Firstly, contributors challenged metaphors because of their negative entailments (n=5), resisting metaphors that carried problematic assumptions such as implying that being trans is a choice, defect, or illness. These responses demonstrate an awareness of the framing effects of metaphor and how they can (inadvertently) reproduce or reinforce harmful discourses. Secondly, one contributor resisted a metaphor for being vague (n=1), citing that the generality of the source domain trivialised the experience of gender dysphoria. This reflects the importance of selecting source domains that effectively capture the intensity and gravitas of the experience. Thirdly, some metaphors were resisted due to their limited scope (n=5), as they only captured certain aspects of the dysphoric experience. For example, they captured feelings of embodied discomfort but omitted significant social or relational aspects, including familial rejection and transphobia.

In addition, contributors also focused on the literal plausibility of the comparison itself, resisting metaphors in cases where the source-target mappings do not work in reality (n=2). In such cases, factual inaccuracies were viewed as opening the metaphor up for misinterpretation. Moreover, metaphors were resisted when they were unclear or difficult to understand (n=2). This indicates that ambiguity led to increased interpretive effort which impacted their effectiveness. Metaphors were also resisted when they did not resonate with the audience and when the source domain was unfamiliar to the intended audience (n=2). In both cases of experiential resistance, although the metaphor “worked” linguistically it did not fulfil its communicative purpose due to the audience’s knowledge and experience. This demonstrates the individualised nature of metaphor reception, as the same metaphor can feel authentic to one person and ineffective to another.

Finally, the dataset included thirteen instances of general resistance, where contributors rejected the use of figurative language for this target domain altogether. Such responses framed figurative language as unnecessary, indirect, or misleading. Contributors expressed concern that metaphors could be misconstrued or weaponised beyond the subreddit, particularly by transphobes. Some contributors protested the expectation placed on trans people to translate their experiences into palatable metaphors for cisgender audiences.

However, as mentioned above, resistance was overwhelmingly constructive. Commentors often proposed alternative metaphors, refined the original metaphor, or engaged in back-and-forth

exchanges which allowed for clarification and reflection. These interactions suggest that resistance was a collaborative process undertaken to safeguard the accuracy and authenticity of the experience.

Research Question 2 Summary

These findings have important communicative implications. The metaphors that are valued and rejected by members of the trans community offer insight into how dysphoria can be talked about in ways that are both accurate and sensitive. Thus, when metaphors for gender dysphoria are used in educational or healthcare materials, those with lived experience should be actively consulted.

9.1.3. Research Question Three

The final research question considered which source domains elicited the most engagement from commentors, that is, which domains were most frequently endorsed and/or resisted. This provides insight into which domains were judged more or less successful in depicting dysphoria.

3. Which source domains receive the highest levels of evaluative engagement?

Figure 17 (reproduced from above) displays the source domains that received evaluation, showing their raw frequencies alongside numbers of instances of endorsement and resistance.

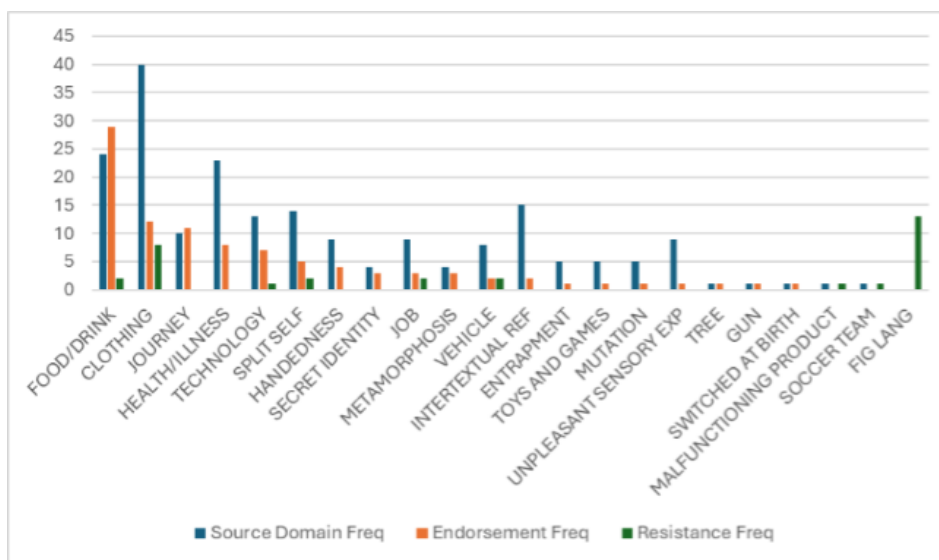


Figure 17. Source domain engagement

Across the dataset, endorsement and resistance were unevenly distributed across source domains, revealing that contributors reacted differently to the types of metaphors used to describe gender dysphoria. FOOD/DRINK and JOURNEY metaphors were endorsed more frequently than they were proposed, indicating strong resonance with contributors. JOURNEY metaphors received no resistance, likely due to their neutrality, conventionality, and accessibility. Similarly, HEALTH/ILLNESS metaphors received no resistance, perhaps as they capture the severity and seriousness of dysphoria in a way that other domains cannot.

In contrast, despite being among the most frequently proposed, CLOTHING metaphors received comparatively low levels of endorsement and the highest levels of resistance. This may be because they could present dysphoria as something superficial that can easily be removed, framing it as external rather than deeply felt.

TECHNOLOGY and SPLIT SELF metaphors received more mixed responses but were still endorsed more overall. A small number of novel one-off source domains received positive evaluations, suggesting that contributors were open to creative framings that offered new ways of thinking about the experience. Finally, resistance to figurative language itself was quite frequent, highlighting discomfort with the use of metaphor to capture a deeply personal experience.

9.2. Contributions

This research makes several methodological and theoretical contributions to research on metaphorical embodiment, metaphorical creativity, metaphor evaluation, and gender dysphoria.

9.2.1 Contributions to Metaphorical Embodiment

As gender dysphoria involves a complex relationship with body, the data provide an opportunity to expand existing conceptualisations of embodiment in metaphor research. The findings offer further support for El Refaie's (2014, 2019) concept of dynamic embodiment which argues that metaphor analysis should take into consideration fluctuating states of bodily awareness dependant on one's relationship with the body. This thesis has proposed that the concept of dys-appearance (Leder, 1990) should be expanded to include dysphoria. Similarly, eu-appearance (Zeiler, 2010) should be expanded to include gender euphoria.

9.2.2. Contributions to Metaphorical Creativity

The overwhelming majority of metaphors in the dataset can be considered creative. While many draw on relatively conventional source domains, such as JOURNEY, CLOTHING or HEALTH/ILLNESS, these are frequently realised in unusual or novel ways. This is typically through the introduction of implausible or hyperbolic components in order to capture the gravitas of gender dysphoria, the illogicality of transphobia, and the lengthy waiting times associated with access to gender-affirming care. In such cases, the metaphorical expression is creative at the linguistic level but is conventional at the conceptual level as it can be explained in terms of an underlying conventional conceptual metaphor. It was proposed that particularly implausible cases are best accounted for using Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

In other cases, contributors drew from less conventional source domains, such as FOOD/DRINK. In some instances, the metaphor is creative at the conceptual level as the metaphor introduces a novel cross-domain mapping that cannot be easily accounted for in terms of a conventional conceptual metaphor. This finding provides further support for the argument that metaphorical creativity in discourse should *minimally* take the linguistic and conceptual levels of metaphor into account (Semino, 2008, 2011). The affordances of Reddit as an anonymous platform may further encourage this creativity.

9.2.3. Contributions to Metaphor Evaluation

This research also contributes to the existing literature on metaphor evaluation. The metalinguistic nature of the data where contributors explicitly discuss what makes a good metaphor for dysphoria makes it well-suited for exploring metaphor evaluation. The data explicitly focuses on the reasons why people like or dislike a particular metaphor.

Moreover, similar threads exist for a wide range of topics online, suggesting that this methodology has broader applicability for metaphor evaluation research beyond the topic of gender dysphoria. Such data sources are a good way to access evaluation in a more naturalistic manner than interview-based or experimental approaches.

This study identifies forms of evaluation not previously identified in the literature. Justified endorsement has received little scholarly attention. This research identified four categories of

justified endorsement. That is, four different reasons given for endorsing a metaphor, providing useful data on the criteria contributors use when judging metaphor success. In addition, this analysis revealed forms of resistance that have not previously been documented in previous work. Notably, propositional and locutional resistance traditionally treated as single categories were differentiated into subtypes, in addition to identifying forms of experiential and general resistance.

Thus, this research provides insight into the motivations behind endorsement and resistance. Though the findings are specific to this discourse context, they have wider applicability.

9.2.4. Contributions to Understanding Trans Lived Experiences

Beyond metaphor research, this research also contributes to current understandings of gender diversity. This research identified a wide range of source domains that have not been previously documented, and as such expands existing understandings of gender dysphoria. Moreover, it demonstrates that gender dysphoria is far from the homogeneous experience depicted in many diagnostic manuals and in healthcare materials and proposes that definitions of gender dysphoria should be two-fold, including bodily and social dimensions.

9.3. Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. Firstly, the dataset is relatively small (37,819 words). A richer analysis could be achieved by analysing more subreddits or examining metaphor use over a longer time period. This could be carried out through the use of corpus linguistic software, methods and tools. However, while corpus approaches to metaphor identification and analysis offer replicability and scalability, they may risk losing some of the nuance that detailed qualitative analysis is able to capture.

In addition, this research focuses exclusively on English-language forums. As demographic information is not readily available for most contributors, it is difficult to situate the data in relation to specific geo-political contexts. This effects the extent to which the analysis can explore how cultural norms, laws and legislation, or differing levels of trans visibility influence metaphor choice and/or evaluation.

Finally, the data source has an explicit focus on metaphor. One implication of this is that the contributors are metaphor aware. As a result, the dataset lends itself to creative elaborated metaphorical scenarios that likely do not reflect the kind used in everyday spontaneous speech. Therefore, the findings are not generalisable to ‘everyday’ contexts. Nevertheless, the metaphors identified here constitute a more curated and reflective form of metaphor use, shaped by the underlying purpose of the threads and the communicative norms of the subreddits.

9.4. Directions for Future Research

Future research could develop these findings in several important ways. Firstly, these findings could form the basis of a Metaphor Menu (Semino et al., 2018). This could be developed through focus groups and participatory workshops with members of the trans community in order to co-create a resource that could be used in educational and clinical contexts. This would help clinicians communicate more sensitively about gender dysphoria, reduce misunderstandings in health-care interactions, and promote better professional-patient relationships. In educational contexts this resource would help to foster more empathy and understanding around gender diversity.

In addition, future research could expand the scope beyond dysphoria to consider metaphors for gender euphoria. This would align with recent movements within trans scholarship and activism that focus on trans joy and seek to represent affirming experiences of gender. Although work by Laura Kate Dale (2021) for example has examined gender euphoria, this was not through a metaphor-specific lens. Thus, there remains considerable scope for investigating how trans people use metaphor to talk about euphoria. This could provide a more balanced account of trans embodied experience and has important implications for metaphor embodiment.

Finally, further research could explore metaphor use across different languages and cultural contexts, particularly in settings where trans identities are more stigmatised or less visible, or where access to gender-affirming care is restricted. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons may reveal how sociopolitical climates shape metaphor choice and evaluation.

9.5. Closing Remarks

This thesis has argued that developing a nuanced, contemporary understanding of gender dysphoria is essential as such understandings shape who is recognised, believed and granted access to support. The findings of this thesis demonstrate that dysphoria cannot be adequately captured by clinical, diagnostic definitions alone. Instead, the voices and perspectives of trans people should be consulted to allow for a more multifaceted inclusive account of dysphoria.

This thesis demonstrates how metaphor can offer insight into experiences that are difficult to articulate and are potentially misunderstood. The existence of Reddit threads explicitly requesting metaphors for dysphoria further demonstrates a recognition of the important role metaphor plays in explaining, validating, and making sense of this experience.

Nevertheless, there remains important work to be done. Continued research of this kind can help shape the lives of trans people by promoting more sensitive communication within clinical, educational, and political contexts.

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