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Doing Transgender: Gender Minorities in the Organization

“I only wanted one thing and that was to be who I am now”: Being a trans young adult and (re) negotiating vocational identity

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Abstract

Developing vocational identity as a young adult is a complex feat and may be even more so for transgender people, who have to navigate their professional selves in a largely cisgender and heteronormative world that minoritizes them. This qualitative study explores how transgender youths develop a vocational identity. Through 10 in-depth interviews in the Netherlands and Belgium, we found that participants had to negotiate favoring education (at the expense of gender transition) or sensemaking their gender identity (at the expense of schooling), while seeking to avoid discrimination. In addition, we observed that transitioning was also an enabling process, facilitating the development of trans young adults' vocational identity. We also found that trans young adults see the (un)attainability of career paths related to anticipated stigmatization and other expectations related to their trans identities. In particular, they mentioned occupations where hegemonic masculinity and gender binarism are praised, while those involving interaction with children and teenagers are not attainable. Organizations celebrating their trans identity and career paths in which the living conditions of other minoritized people are improved were perceived as attainable and desirable. The insights presented here show that even in countries that are considered “progressive” in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, the vocational identity

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of trans youth is nevertheless influenced by (and at times constrained by) their gender identity. The need for career counselors, educational institutions, and organizations to work on facilitating the future career development of trans individuals and their access to inclusive spaces is discussed.

KEYWORDS

career choice, career development, transgender, vocational aspirations, vocational identity, young adult

1 | “I ONLY WANTED ONE THING AND THAT WAS TO BE WHO I AM NOW”: (RE) NEGOTIATING VOCATIONAL IDENTITY AS A TRANS YOUNG PERSON

There is now a growing appreciation in organization studies of the nuances inherent in embodying a trans gender identity at work as well as calls to better understand how trans persons negotiate their professional self in a world that is largely heteronormative and cisgender (e.g., Dray et al., 2020; Köllen, 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2013; McFadden, 2015; McFadden, 2020; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016; Muhr et al., 2016; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016, 2018). We build upon this work by focusing on trans young adults at a time in their life when they are simultaneously exploring their gender identity and their vocational identity and contribute by demonstrating some of the ways in which these (re)negotiations occur. This is important because the acquisition of vocational identity is an especially salient and “critical developmental task” for young persons vis-à-vis their career (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007, p. 143). Self-exploration shaped by one’s individual characteristics and the environment are paramount to this exploratory and iterative process. When figuring out the kind of work one is interested in, young persons must form an understanding of who they are, comprehend what is and what is not under their direct control, and also network and communicate with others (Lent et al., 1994). This process is rarely linear and unconstrained; it is “messy” and complex because of personal and contextual factors that complicate it, such as individual “choice”, privilege and personal experiences with oppression, access to power and resources (Karam & Afioni, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2011), and these affect how people sense-make their vocational identity. In particular, Erikson (1968) spotlights the importance of “wholeness” in identity development as well as identification with role models and psychosocial lived experiences involving crises and resolutions. Marcia (1980, p. 159) describes it as a *mélange* of “drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history,” which are then cross-referenced with what are deemed to be acceptable vocational options (Meijers, 1998).

There is nascent interest in the field of counseling to better understand the career decision making of trans persons (e.g., Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2011); yet Goldberg et al. (2021) still reaffirm that the “career development literature is [...] limited in its consideration of how trans people evaluate different career paths and job opportunities” (p. 1151). In this paper, we put forward that the “messy” process of developing vocational identity is especially so for trans young persons, who are negotiating and renegotiating their self-expressions of identity all while living through complex psychosocial experiences constrained by limited role models and finite perceived career options. Trans individuals, defined as individuals whose gender identity does not comfortably fit the sex they were assigned to at birth in a heteronormative world (Collins et al., 2015), have to navigate both a unique set of challenges vis-à-vis gender identity and more generalized experiences of the “messiness” that comes with simply being a young person who is exploring their vocational identity. These two components of identity (i.e., gender and vocational) are interlinked and necessitate reconnaissance and practice at around the same developmental time—during young adulthood. For trans young persons, this complicated phenomenon is marred by experiences of and expectations about discrimination and harassment at school (Pizmony-Levy, 2018) and university (Knutson et al., 2021). Although we appreciate that people have several points of intersecting identities and that

trans young people are not the only ones to experience discrimination and harassment, there are nevertheless certain unique factors related specifically to gender identity that add particular nuance to the vocational identity of trans young persons. For instance, gender identity disclosure, gender transitioning, and access to legal gender recognition are all common challenges that can impact the early career decision making of trans young adults (Scott et al., 2011). In this study, we explored the lived experiences of trans young adults in the Netherlands and Belgium vis-à-vis the development of vocational identity and we contribute by demonstrating how vocational identity and gender identity are intertwined and interplay, both impacting on career-related aspirations and choices. The overarching research question that guided our explorations was “*how do trans young adults negotiate their vocational identity?*”

1.1 | Being transgender in the Netherlands and Belgium

We base our theorizing in the Netherlands and Belgium, two countries that enjoy comparatively privileged positions vis-à-vis legal protection and trans rights in the world. In the Netherlands, the Equal Treatment Act 1994 was extended in 2019 to prohibit discrimination due to gender identity. In Belgium, the Gender Recognition Act entered into force in 2018 enabling legal gender recognition based on self-determination. The Eurobarometer survey (2019) generally reports positive perceptions in the Netherlands and in Belgium toward trans people with a majority of respondents supporting legal gender change (82% and 70%, respectively). Despite these protections awarded to trans persons in general, legal recognition for trans youth is still limited. For example, in the Netherlands, it is not possible for children under age 16 to change the gender markers in their identity documents (COC Netherlands, 2013)—meaning that impressionable teenagers can be “outed” when applying for summer jobs, shadowing/mentoring opportunities, and asking for reference letters from their teachers and professors. Similarly, minors in Belgium have reported difficulties accessing legal gender recognition (ILGA-Europe, 2021). Moreover, despite inclusive legal policies in the Netherlands, only one-third of trans students aged between 13 and 20 were out at school about their gender identity (Pizmony-Levy, 2018). Negative remarks about deviating from expected heteronormative cisgender expressions as well as slurs were reported—7.7% were even physically harassed and 2.7% were assaulted at school. Against this backdrop, forming a clear understanding of career interests, goals, and abilities (i.e., a vocational identity; Holland et al., 1980) becomes even more complicated for trans young persons who have to invest extra efforts in navigating the complexities that arise from society's stigmatization of their gender identity.

1.2 | Negotiating identity: The overlap between gender and vocational identity

It is during young adulthood that individuals start to form a vocational identity resulting from the integration of lived experiences (Holland et al., 1980; Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012). For trans young adults, formative stages are especially complex, because young adulthood is a time in which the development of gender identity and forming vocational aspirations overlap (Schmidt et al., 2011). Trans youth therefore not only have to grapple with the complexities of making sense of their vocational selves, they must also navigate the intricacies of their emerging gender identity. In the context of gender identity development, trans individuals, pursuing their authentic self, seek coherence between their expressed actions and their internal conceptualizations and between the latter and what others perceive from them (Martinez et al., 2017). In finding this delicate balance, trans individuals can gain a congruent sense of self and a more positive self-regard (Martinez et al., 2017). Furthermore, identity development occurs in relation to and through interaction with others (Flum & Kaplan, 2012), and this feedback from the social context feeds into trans individuals' self-concept, this is to say, the ways in which they evaluate and describe themselves (Lent et al., 1994). The process by which trans young people build a self-concept based on feedback from others is particularly nuanced for several reasons. Personal lived experiences, and where they are in their journey to expressing their authentic selves, matter (King et al., 2020). It is a state of constant negotiations and renegotiations: if trans youth are “out”

and their gender identity is visible, their own identity conceptualizations can be reinforced. However, at the same time, they may also be subject to discrimination, which can negatively impact their beliefs about competence (i.e., self-efficacy). Conversely, if trans youth conceal their gender identity, they may not receive feedback on their full authentic selves (Martinez et al., 2017), hindering the development of what Erikson (1968) described as “wholeness.” This is particularly complex for trans youth who are also negotiating—and testing and trialling, the benefits of “coming out” or not.

Moreover, trans youth navigate these complexities under the spotlight of immense scrutiny over their bodies at a pivotal time when these may be changing due to gender transition. Indeed, transitioning is not an instantaneous event but prolonged multifaceted series of experiences that may, at times, be iterative. Transitioning consists of different psychological (e.g., searching for guidance), social (e.g., dressing as the identified gender), and for some, but not all, hormonal (e.g., going through hormonal therapy) and surgical (e.g., changing sex characteristics) steps that trans individuals may take in an attempt to match their gender identity with their gender expression (Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2013). The embodied relationship with our own bodies, and the systems with which we interact, is crucial to the development of our identity (Nettleton & Watson, 2002). For trans individuals, and in particular young persons who may be questioning their identity and beginning their journey to expressing their authentic selves, these experiences can be quite complex and especially salient in a heteronormative binary world. “Male” and “female” bodies are expected to perform gender according to hegemonic, heteronormative, and cisgender norms (which often favor the masculine)—our bodies thus become political sites: those who conform and those who are “other” (Butler, 1999). Against this backdrop, society awards power to certain bodies (e.g., degree qualifications, professional possibilities, and high-profile role models) and withholds it from others (e.g., exclusions from school, unwelcoming professions, and lacuna of inspirational role models).

1.3 | The impact of discrimination on vocational identity

Lived experiences add to the core self-conceptualizations of trans young adults, but also have an impact on their vocational identity (Flum & Kaplan, 2012; Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012). Through socialization, people learn what the community understands as being a legitimate professional, acquiring information from role models linked to competence and professionalism (Cruess et al., 2019; Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012). Furthermore, these role models contribute to the setting of individuals' vocational identity (Flum & Kaplan, 2012), facilitating—or hindering—their success in future career decisions (Holland et al., 1980). In this educational context of vocational identity development, trans youth report discrimination and stigma starting at school (Butler et al., 2019) and continuing into graduate education (Knutson et al., 2021). More specifically, for those questioning their gender identity, schools can be sites of discrimination from both peers *and* teachers (Bower-Brown et al., 2021). In Europe, where we based our study, 42% of transgender youth under 18 always-to-often experience, at school, negative comments or conduct in relation to their trans identity (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA] 2020). As a result, trans young adults more frequently discontinue formal education or consider leaving school (FRA, 2020), implying a forced barrier in their socialization as future professionals.

Stigmatization due to gender identity also affects the career prospects of trans individuals (Cancela et al., 2022). For instance, navigating employment processes, such as sending out CVs, attending interviews, and changing work, can be especially marginalizing for trans individuals (Beaugard et al., 2021). In the Netherlands and Belgium in 2020, 39% and 37% of trans individuals, respectively, felt discriminated against at work or when searching for a job (FRA, 2020). Common occurrences of workplace discrimination include feeling othered via negative stereotypes, microaggressions, and outright harassment (McFadden, 2020). Indeed, trans individuals believe that their gender identity limits their career options (Budge et al., 2010), they have lower salary expectations (Ng et al., 2012), and trans workers are more likely to be in low-income job categories than cisgender individuals (Ciprikis et al., 2020). There are also gendered nuances amongst trans persons; for instance, Dutch trans women experience more

social stigma than Dutch trans men, in particular, from cisgender men (Verbeek et al., 2020). This displacement of trans individuals to the periphery of education and the professional space engenders a narrative on who is not to be considered a legitimate professional: those who are situated outside the boundaries of cisheteronormativity (Mizzi, 2013).

1.4 | Vocational aspirations: Inclusion and stigmatization

Exclusion from career-related contexts may lead trans young adults to feel unwelcome, even unsafe, in many careers. Compared to cisgender young adults, trans young adults may perceive additional barriers when considering occupational options (Budge et al., 2010). For example, Levitt and Ippolito (2013) found that trans individuals perceive the visibility of their identity as limiting professional opportunities. Also, research has shown that trans young adults are inclined to choose occupations that they expect to be supportive toward gender diversity, and where they feel safer to disclose their authentic selves (Kaplan, 2014; Ng et al., 2012; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Some may alter their trajectories to avoid perceived discrimination (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016); others may follow a path where there is room for transgender advocacy and activism (Brewster et al., 2014; Budge et al., 2010; Levitt & Ippolito, 2013). Ng et al. (2012) further reported that LGBT individuals are likely to highlight altruism, social justice, and collective self-interest as important work values that are salient when considering different career options. Therefore, the vocational identity of trans young adults may develop in close alignment with career paths that resonate with their experience as trans individuals.

Although people can revolt against societal expectations and spearhead ambitious career trajectories, even entering activist occupations (Karam & Afiouni, 2021), personal experience with traumatic events and collective situatedness of oppression do matter; how we sensemake our careers is inevitably framed by "historically specific social locations" and the "experiences of collective oppression" (Karam & Afiouni, 2021, p. 678). For trans individuals, building a vocational identity and sensemaking careers may be shaped by both personal lived experiences of their trans journey as well as more collective experiences of belonging to a marginalized group. Indeed, Savickas (2012, p. 147) calls for a more contextualized understanding of how careers develop, mindful of how individuals "adapt" to their environments. Much of the extant literature in organization studies concerning trans persons has focused on trans workers' gender transition, general career experiences, or on the process of job search (Cancela et al., 2022; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016); yet further insights on trans career development remain "limited" (Goldberg et al., 2021, p. 1151). This is indeed an important and necessary avenue for research for we need to better understand the lived experiences of trans young adults who are in a precareer stage or living their first employment (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016). Our study thus builds upon the previous work from scholars in the field of counseling pertaining to the career development of trans persons (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2021; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2013; Scott et al., 2011) and contributes to interdisciplinary discussions in organization studies on how trans persons negotiate gender identity in relation to work (e.g., Dray et al., 2020; Köllen, 2018; McFadden, 2015; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016; Muhr et al., 2016; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016, 2018) to further our understanding of the intersection of gender, careers, and vocational identity.

By applying queer reflexivity (McDonald, 2013) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to interviews with trans young adults, we show that gender identity is pivotal to forming vocational identity, and in many ways, takes precedence over the latter such that being one's authentic self is prioritized over career decisions. At the same time, we illuminate how transitioning can contribute to self-confidence and self-efficacy perceptions but that this is a precarious balance. Finally, we identify how the dearth of collective role models in trans youth's educational environment poses challenges for impressionable young adults questioning career pathways and options and illustrate how some professions appear more or less (un)attainable precisely because of one's gender identity and the expected inclusivity of particular career paths. Our methodological approach is reflexively narrated below.

2 | METHODS

Our study explored how trans young adults sensemake career decisions, and given that we are three female cisgender authors, we approached the research inductively, allowing the stories of participants to flow. Via reflexive consideration, we acknowledge that our position as cisgender researchers might influence participants' own sensemaking and limit our own interpretations thereof. We were also very mindful that we were at the same time "other" (despite embodying other forms of queerness) and also part of the oppressive system (for we were white cisgender middle class women). The first author, who led the data collection and analysis, had previously collaborated on research related to LGB individuals' experiences and heteronormativity in the workplace from a queer perspective. The second and third authors had longstanding interest in stigma and health, especially with marginalized groups including trans individuals and identify with feminist and intersectional approaches that foreground harm reduction and (sub-)cultural humility. However, our understanding and interpretations are inevitably shaped by our own lived experiences as cisgender women and our positions as academic researchers. This was communicated to participants during the interview and the first author invited participants to adjust the questions and point out any lessons to be learned.

2.1 | Study context

Our study took place in the Netherlands and Belgium. The prevalence of transgender identity in the Netherlands was estimated in 2015 to be 2.6% for trans women and 1.9% for trans men (Wiepjes et al., 2018). Also in 2015, in the Flanders region (i.e., Dutch-speaking region) of Belgium, estimates of gender incongruence in the general population were 0.7% for men and 0.6% for women (Van Caenegem et al., 2015). Both the Netherlands and Belgium are considered to be so-called "progressive" countries in terms of LGBTIQ+ rights (ILGA-Europe, 2021); although trans youth in these contexts might fare better, comparatively, to their global counterparts where, in some countries, being trans is criminalized, public stigma and discrimination do nevertheless occur. There are still significant gains to be made in terms of the acceptance and normalization of the broad range of identities along the gender spectrum (Motmans et al., 2012; Ratcliffe and Stutterheim, *in preparation*; Verbeek et al., 2020) and trans persons remain marginalized even in relatively "progressive" countries, such as the Netherlands and Belgium. For example, the risk of suicide in the Netherlands is three to four times higher in trans people than in the general population (Wiepjes et al., 2018)—a statistic that is, alas, reflective of global trends (Virupaksha et al., 2016). Labor force statistics are notoriously difficult to find, often due to trans invisibility in data collection surveys (yet another example of marginalization); yet, studies that do compare trans employment rates to that of the general population reveal a grim reality of high unemployment and low income (Leppel, 2020). Educational attainment is lower for trans youth if they began exploring their trans gender identity in adolescence (Wilkinson et al., 2018); they are also more likely to fail secondary school courses than cisgender youth (Wilkinson et al., 2021). These are some of the reasons why it remains important to explore the vocational identity of trans youth.

2.2 | Sampling and recruitment

Qualitative research is especially pertinent to unraveling the experiences of stigmatized groups (Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021)—such as trans young adults. First, we started by purposively reaching out to our trans contacts and communities through Dutch and Belgian LGBTIQ+ organizations. Purposive sampling was employed as it has the capacity to improve the match between the sample and the research aims, improves trustworthiness, and serves to increase depth of understanding (Campbell et al., 2020)—in this case, of how trans youth negotiate vocational identity. We then had to complement purposive sampling with snowball sampling because marginalized groups, such as trans individuals, are notoriously difficult to reach for research purposes for several reasons. First, the overall

population size might be smaller than the general population; hence, there are simply less people to reach, but more importantly, marginalized individuals might be, rightly, hyper cautious of engaging with academics due to historical mistreatment, such as problematic and voyeuristic research practices (see Vincent, 2018)—unfortunately, a common occurrence in the LGBTQ+ research (e.g., Muhr et al., 2016; Riach et al., 2014). Trans communities also experience participation exhaustion due to research being done *at* them (instead of in collaboration), and for self-preservation, may choose to be remain hidden, especially young adults who are in a critical phase in their lives (Austin, 2016). We grappled with these constraints as we considered how best to connect with our difficult to reach community and how do to so in a collaborative and authentic manner that was nevertheless tailored to our research project (for guidance on advancements in qualitative methodology in this area, please see Pratt et al., 2020). We are humbled that the trans youth who came forward shared our study with others; in fact, they even offered to post recruitment messages in private Facebook groups, which we take as a symbol of their trust in us and reflective of the rapport that we sensitively nurtured together. Our theorizing in this paper is based on the lived experiences of 10 Dutch or Belgian trans young adults aged 18–25 years who voluntarily contributed to our research. This is in line with the qualitative tradition of seeking depth of understanding rather than generalizability; for this reason, exploratory qualitative researchers favor in-depth interviews interspersed with follow-up questions and prompts that facilitate participant reflection and sensemaking (Boddy, 2016). This is especially important for stigmatized groups that have been marginalized and discriminated against (Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021). Our sample size is indeed quite typical of LGBTQ+ studies (e.g., Muhr et al., 2016; Riach et al., 2014) and is perfectly suitable, and even necessary, for underexplored fields as to generate novel insights (Boddy, 2016).

2.3 | Data collection

The 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately 1 h (range: 40–80 min) were carried out face-to-face ($N = 5$) or online ($N = 5$) in English at a location selected by the participant. Participants' demographic data are shown in Table 1. It was important to maintain anonymity and protect our participants, and for this reason, only the participant and the first author were present in each interview. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience in Maastricht University. All participants received information about the purpose of the interview in advance. This set out the context of the research as a whole as well as the topics that would be discussed during the interview. Specifically, we indicated that our aim was to know about their vocational aspirations and how their experiences as trans persons may have shaped their career-related choices. All interviews were preceded by informed consent, including the permission to record, standards of confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without prejudice. The first author self-identified as appropriate and indicated that the interview would be a casual conversation. We were mindful to nurture a safe interview environment based on trust and humility—questions and corrections were welcomed and encouraged.

Although questions were flexible and adapted to each specific conversation and the individual flow of each discussion, we had prepared a semi-structured interview guide based on key themes identified in the extant literature and preliminary discussions with trans community members. The content of the interview focused on current interests, vocational aspirations, and expectations for their future career (e.g., *Why did you choose that degree/study program or job; What would be your ideal career?*); perceived barriers and facilitators in the development of their vocational identity (e.g., *Which careers would you say that seem unattainable to you?; What experiences have you had as a trans person at school/at university/at work?*) and cultural factors in the Netherlands and Belgium affect the process (e.g., *What aspects of the Netherlands/Belgian cultural context do you think may have made your experience easier/more difficult as a trans person?*). No monetary compensation was provided for participation.

We are mindful that our interpretations and sensemaking are influenced, and constrained, by our own embodiment of being cisgender women and also researchers, and we have attempted to reflexively tease out our interpretations from participants' accounts. We took steps recommended by Vincent (2018) for how we might ethically

TABLE 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

| Participant | Age | National identity | Occupation | Education level attained | Gender identity | Sex assigned at birth | Time in transition | Sexual orientation |
|-------------|-----|-------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Albert | 23 | Dutch | Student | High school | Male | Female | 3 years 1 month | Gay |
| Bart | 20 | Dutch | Student | High school | Male | Female | 6 years | Straight |
| David | 21 | Belgian | Student | Bachelors | Male | Female | 2 years 9 months | Bisexual |
| Eduard | 25 | Dutch | Student; part-time worker | Bachelors | Trans man | Female | 10 months | Bisexual |
| Fabian | 23 | Dutch | Student; volunteer | Bachelors | Trans man | Female | 2 years 4 months | Other: Pansexual |
| Irma | 24 | Dutch | Student | High school | Female | Male | 4 years | Bisexual |
| Lieke | 19 | Belgian | Student | High school | Female | Male | 3 years | Other: Unsure |
| Mattias | 18 | Dutch | Student; volunteer | High school | Trans man | Female | 2 years 3 months | Other: Asexual |
| Mark | 22 | Dutch | Student; part-time worker | High school | Trans man | Female | 2 years | Straight |
| Sylvain | 22 | Dutch | Student; part-time worker | Bachelors | Male | Female | 2 years 8 months | Straight |

Note: Pseudonyms have been used in order to protect participants' identity.

collaborate with trans participants given that we, as a research team, were cisgender. For this reason, we involved people from the trans community in the generation and reformulation of the interview questions and invited feedback during the interviews. Our care to form rapport is at least partly evidenced in the support that we received from participants in spotlighting our study to their networks. Moreover, the first author participated in trans-community spaces at the invitation from participants.

2.4 | Data analysis

During data interpretation and analysis, we applied queer reflexivity (McDonald, 2013). We recognize that we occupy different social locations within the research team, between us and the participants, and within participants themselves, because of the different ways of understanding identity (e.g., having a trans identity vs. a trans history), unique life experiences and intersectionality taking part (McDonald, 2013). Self-reflection to deconstruct our own preconceived notions was an ongoing process; for instance, we often had to challenge our spotlighting of negative accounts and instead actively reflect on positive accounts as well to represent a holistic lived experience. Participants also joined in this objective—they were the ones who led the conversations, and we invited them to interrogate and develop our interview questions. We are also thankful to the editor and reviewers who challenged us to labor with the data further and excavate additional hidden meaning in participants' accounts.

In this context, thematic analysis was conducted in line with the principles suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021). Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author, and this allowed her to become immersed in the data and familiarize herself with it. Notes for initial interpretations were made with reflection on how being cis-gender academic researchers might affect those interpretations. Then, the transcripts were re-read and pieces of information that appeared to be interesting, meaningful, or that were repeated across interviews were identified and coded using Atlas.ti 8. The meaning of each code was described in memos. After going through the process of coding several

times for each interview, we collated a list of codes. These codes were subsequently linked to each other according to their content, and themes were formed (see Table 2 for code tree). The process was iterative and involved going backward and forward between themes and transcripts and included critical and reflexive discussions among the research team. If additional insights that could change the structure of the codes arose, these were documented in memos. The themes were then reviewed and revised with the research team. Lastly, agreement was reached based on the interpreted structure that underlaid participants' experiences. After a review, three major themes were found in the data: (1) The interplay between transitioning and education, (2) transitioning as a career-enabling process, and (3) perceived access to career choice. Each is discussed in the following.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | The interplay between transitioning and education

Participants discussed transitioning as an encompassing goal that took precedence over education and choosing a career path. For example, Mark shared: "I strongly have the opinion that you have to transition and really have your mental health in order before you can think about career and future and what I like to do" and Bart explained how transitioning shifted the vocational identity development to the periphery:

I only wanted one thing and that was to be who I am now. ... I couldn't look for what kind of study I want to do, or how are my grades. I didn't care. I only wanted to transition.

(Bart, 20 years old)

In these quotes, we can see how important the process of transitioning is for participants. In particular, for Bart, this imperative took over ("I only wanted **one** thing") and education ("grades") and vocational identity were cast aside ("I didn't care"), and he invested himself wholeheartedly into transitioning.

At times however, the prioritizing of transitioning came at a cost to participants. For instance, opting to transition during studies had a cost on educational performance. In the case of Sylvain, he explains that his grades suffered as a result:

I did have to focus some of my time in my transition, and it did take some focus out of it (...) If I had not transitioned during my studies, I would have better grades. Because, at the end, you can only do so much for your program, right?

(Sylvain, 22 years old)

Indeed, transitioning can be a very challenging and complex process that, in some cases, is accompanied by mental health difficulties, such as anxiety or/and depression due to societal stigma. For instance, Irma explained that, despite perceiving herself as capable, her emotional state hindered her from focusing on her education and subsequent career:

I honestly do think that I would be able to do more if I had less of my personal problems. I have the motivation for it. I could easily go to university and finish that [but] I can't do it because emotionally I just can't handle it.

(Irma, 25 years old)

In Irma's account, we can hear the discord between her capability ("I could easily go to university") and motivation—which she had, and the personal events in her life (born out of the discrimination she faced because of her gender identity) that prevented her from doing so.

TABLE 2 Coding and theme formation.

| | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Transitioning | Concealability | Concealability—"Outing" Concealability—Being out Concealability—Passing Strengths of being trans Segmentation (?) Conforming Reasons pass: Have a fresh start |
| | Role of others | Negative experiences studies Negative reactions Weird reactions Positive reactions Social support Experience with teachers Impact of friends Influence: Teachers Career counselor: Reassuring + Influence: Career counselor Influence: Family Influence: Psychologist Educational level (Social) media Experience: Inequality Use of name and pronouns Showing acceptance helps |
| | Self-awareness | Confidence and self-worth Self-efficacy Self-knowledge Reflection |
| | Mental health | Confusion Fear Ambition Work centrality Interest: Diversity "Helping" others "To make a change" Factor: Being diverse |
| Career options and choices | Workplace inclusiveness | Trust + safety Relationship with colleagues Stick to values "Be and express oneself" |

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| | | |
|---------|--------------|--|
| | Gender roles | Macho culture Restrooms/changing rooms Gender of others Differences transmen/women |
| | Limitations | Need for references Social interaction—Barrier Autonomy and stability Visibility Working with children/youth |
| Culture | Openness | Culture—Laws Culture—Institutional efforts build awareness Culture—Free transition Culture—Religion Culture—Diversity Culture—Individualism |
| | Limitations | Culture—Issues Netherlands/Belgium Culture—Villages |

Some participants reported taking a break from their studies in order to cope with the emotional load that accompanies transitioning. Lieke explained that she dropped out of high school because she was not able to, at that time, cope with others' reactions to the physical changes that her social transition brought about:

Social transition basically means that I would get bullied even more. It would be horrible. And then I quitted school and then, when I was 16, I said "Fuck it, I am going to do this". Because I already quitted school, most people didn't care.

(Lieke, 19 years old)

What is especially poignant in Lieke's account is how she had to drop out of high school early to transition to protect herself from further bullying. We can see in Lieke's account the direct impact of discrimination and harassment vis-à-vis transitioning on educational attainment at that time. Due to the bullying that Lieke experienced at school, she felt that she had no choice but to leave school early to transition. Some participants sought to circumvent this and planned their transition between educational levels (e.g., between high school and post-secondary education) or when changing schools. For example, Albert specifically waited to complete high school before embarking on his transitioning journey:

I decided to finish high school before transitioning. (...) I just didn't want to make this thing out of it, having to go through all your teachers having to call you by a different name (...) all these people asking a lot of questions.

(Albert, 23 years old)

Lieke's narrative clearly shows how trans youth are put in positions where they have to make decisions that impact on their vocational identity out of the necessity to protect their gender identity. David reflects something similar: "I would like to have a fresh start. That's why I want to have my masters abroad (...) I just want to be David first, and not transgender" (David, 21 years old). In his case, David had already transitioned, but made his precareer choice partly based on being perceived and treated beyond his gender identity. We note how some youth were not making

educational decisions based on their career aspirations, but rather because of harassment around transitioning or differential treatment in formal education. At the same time, Albert's narrative shows how gender identity decisions were stalled for educational reasons. David's decision was driven by the need to be known by who he is after transition. We note that neither solution is ideal.

3.2 | Transition as an enabling process for vocational identity development

Most participants pointed out that their gender transition influenced their vocational interests through its impact on mental health. For example, Mark shared how his interest in mental health emerged from his own personal struggles:

The mental health aspect interested me a lot because I had a lot of friends that struggled with that and also myself (...) I care about the people that have a mental illness because I just know the struggle, you know? So, I wanted to do something about (...) minorities and stigma.

(Mark, 22 years old)

Upon reflection, we recognize that most participants, like Mark, expressed a desire to help others who were also marginalized. For example, Mattias aspired to become a gender therapist and Bart wanted to be a psychologist. Fabian even turned his aspiration to become a dental hygienist into an even more prosocial calling by wanting to offer his services to, specifically, people with disabilities:

I would like to build a practice where dental hygiene is offered for people with disabilities (...) Something tells me men are mostly very driven to make money and are not very social. It is a stereotype I have in my head. But I am also like "I don't care". I am a social worker being interested in other people and especially when people are having a hard time.

(Fabian, 23 years old)

In Fabian's account, we can see how helping others who are having a "hard time" is especially important to his vocational identity. Indeed, he describes his vocational identity as a "social worker being," regardless of his chosen career pathway of dentistry. Moreover, we see how this willingness to help others transcends the demands of gender stereotypes. We interpret these accounts as suggesting that the experiences of trans young adults may facilitate a keenness to contribute, via a career, to the well-being of not only other trans people, but also other marginalized or minority individuals.

The data also suggest that gender transition played a role in self-awareness construction via an increase in confidence: "During my transition, my confidence actually grew a lot because you start to see who you want to see (...) and suddenly you realize why you were so insecure about it [yourself] during puberty" (Sylvain, 22 years old). By progressively expressing their gender identity, the trans young adults in this sample were able to form a more coherent image of themselves (i.e., a coherent self-concept), which improved self-confidence, and can impact vocational identity development.

David also explained in his interview that although transitioning was complex and emotionally draining, his confidence in being able to achieve his goals grew:

I've had such a long and tiring process of feeling better about myself, and starting to love yourself, accepting who you are. [It] is a very slow and ongoing process - [it is] still going on, but having completed a lot of those steps really helps you to say, "Okay, I want this, so I am just going to do this". So, even if this can happen, I am still going to take the leap and do it.

(David, 21 years old)

Transitioning may therefore also contribute to increased self-efficacy. Mark also reported that his confidence grew after some time in transition and that feeling better improved his performance and nurtured his ambitions:

[Before transitioning] I didn't reflect on what I could do at all. Now that I am feeling better, and now that I am transitioning my performance and ambition, just everything, has gone up exponentially. It is actually really surprising what you can do when you feel alright.

(Mark, 22 years old)

Many of the participants in this study indicated that, during and after transition, they set higher goals. Their narratives suggested that, by transitioning, they were better able regulate their behavior to achieve their goals. However, building confidence is not a direct and linear path. Some participants reported that they did not feel confident enough to carry out some tasks, especially those that require interaction with others, and this impacted their choices with respect to work and career:

They asked me to go to work in a house where mostly young people with mental disabilities live. I chose not to go there. (...) I did not feel good enough, in a way of being a professional. I was scared that, if I would be there, people would see this insecurity and use it against me.

(Fabian, 23 years old)

Not feeling fully confident in one's body may thus affect trans young adults' performance, particularly when they have to demonstrate assertiveness. In turn, the fear of performing poorly may lead some to avoid career tasks, particularly those that involve social interaction. Self-confidence was considered important, and indeed, self-confidence was mentioned by participants as a feeling toward themselves that they wanted to improve through their transition.

Moreover, vocational identity development may also be facilitated by the participants' legal and cultural background. The overall impression of the participants was of living in a culture that was open and where support resources for trans people were accessible as Sylvain illustrates: "The culture that is here is very positive. I could actually transition safely [and] find the right people who accept it." Support was not only limited to access to gender transition in public healthcare, but also from companies that ease participants' transitioning experience, as Fabian explains: "They are thinking how to make it possible for me to still have an income [during transition]. It is in the Netherlands, I think, a wonderful thing." A context that provides the necessary elements for trans people to feel they can transition safely may limit barriers to vocational identity development and smooth trans young adults' career-related experiences.

In short, the data suggest that once trans young adults are advanced in their gender transition, their experience generally enables career development. The growth in self-confidence from overcoming obstacles and finally expressing a desired self could enable subsequent setting of, and approach to, career goals, which may lean toward activism and helping others who are marginalized. Furthermore, all of these enablers of vocational identity development are made possible by a context that facilitates trans young adults' gender transition.

3.3 | Perceived access to occupations in the formation of vocational identity

Participants mentioned various factors they took into consideration when exploring and choosing between different career options. Some participants said that they were concerned that they would have fewer professional opportunities because they have a stigmatized identity. For example, Eduard expressed fear that opportunities and access to work will be limited because of other people's prejudices:

Sometimes I am afraid that [being out as a trans person] influences my career in a bad way because I am just afraid that I won't be hired or I am afraid to be in the last group to do interviews - that I would be the first one to be dropped because I am trans. I don't know, people think I have problems.

(Eduard, 25 years old)

We can hear in Eduard's account how he is afraid that his gender identity will interfere with career opportunities—that he may not get hired, and that interviewers will think that he has “problems” simply because he is trans. Mattias also mentions this fear of being rejected: “Being a gender therapist is more attainable because (...) they wouldn't turn me away because I am trans. It definitely makes me worry less about being trans for the job.” (Mattias, 18 years old). In this case, Mattias combines in his vocational identity a willingness to support other trans people in their transition with fear of being rejected in other jobs. Although some participants considered being open about their gender identity as important to obtain social support and secure self-authenticity, others reported a desire to conceal their gender identity in order to maintain employment and/or avoid discrimination. Indeed, visibility was something considered by participants when conceiving their career options. Later in his interview, Mattias mentioned that a lack of *visible trans role models* made it difficult for him to know which careers were attainable:

There is not a lot of trans visibility in (...) jobs where you see people. In office jobs, I wouldn't know (...) what kind of people do that because they work in offices. In jobs in the media, I just don't see trans people. So, let's say I just don't know if it would even be possible for me to be successful in that because none of us has made it so far.

(Mattias, 18 years old)

It is especially poignant in Mattias' account how a young 18-year-old person is confused about what is and what is not “possible” in terms of career because “none of us has made it so far.” Similar to Eduard, Mattias felt that the options for career choice were limited. Bart specified this by pointing out that some jobs with high visibility to customers or clients might be especially out of reach:

Jobs in which you are anonymous, I don't think it would matter, but if you, for example, would be a teacher, standing in front of the class with children and stuff, I think it would definitely have an impact.

(Bart, 20 years old)

As we can see, Bart specifically mentioned the field of education and *working with children* as career paths that are inaccessible for trans individuals. Similarly, David described how he quit volunteering at a summer camp for children because some parents took issue with a trans person caring for their children:

Some parents were like “Oh, wait, but I don't want my child to be in his group”. So, it was just a very negative environment (...) I just had to stop because there were too many parents that were giving shit.

(David, 21 years old)

We can note, in these participants' accounts, how some career paths, especially those that involved interaction with children or teenagers, were conceived to be unattainable careers. Interestingly, working with children was not considered to be unattainable because of the children themselves but rather because of stigmatizing attitudes held by parents:

When I started transition, we weren't very sure how this would actually work with the boys, because (...) there was some kind of fear that, maybe, parents wouldn't accept it. There was a lot of activities with children in the neighbourhood, and at certain point you have to tell them “I am transitioning, I want you to use a different name, I want to be called differently” and that is a very slow process for some people. Children, they did it quite quickly.

(Sylvain, 22 years old)

We note in Sylvain's account how he too was afraid, in particular, that the parents of the children “wouldn't accept it” whereas, actually, the children “did it quite quickly.”

Another set of occupations perceived to be unattainable were occupations where the organizational culture strongly reflects hegemonic masculinity:

It is very overwhelming. You are kind of rediscovering yourself once you start your transition (...) and then, coming into such a rougher world like [the] police or [becoming] a trucker or (...) getting in a [stigmatizing] world... if it is a man's world, this is tough.

(David, 21 years old)

Many participants, both those who identified as trans men and those who identified as trans woman, perceived *male-dominated careers*, such as the military or the police, as overwhelming, challenging, harsh, and intimidating. This was especially true when participants were still in the process of discovering their identity and going through the early stages of their transition. Participants indicated that, in male-dominated careers, they would be unwantedly confronted with the masculine and feminine parts of themselves. They also reported that, in male-dominated careers, there are significant external pressures to conform to stereotyped gender roles. In similar vein, some participants reported *gendered professions* to be unattainable:

I feel like I would definitely have trouble with becoming a lawyer in a commercial law firm [because the field] is quite gendered. Women wear skirts and men suits (...) and I would feel like I wouldn't fit in because I would feel like they would think I am weird for wanting to be a guy.

(Eduard, 25 years old)

Later in his interview, Eduard discussed how he had left a job because he did not feel safe or comfortable in a job that stipulated dress codes for men and women. Evidently, having to choose whether to adhere to specified gender roles or intentionally reject them may be a choice that trans young adults do not want to make in their careers, thus making gendered career choices unattainable.

In short, trans young adults perceived professions that involve interaction with children and youth as less accessible. Additionally, they reported careers that are male-dominated and embedded in a hegemonic masculine culture and careers that are highly gendered, as less accessible, less acceptable, and less attainable.

By contrast, organizations perceived to have an *inclusive organizational culture* toward diversity were preferred: "I suppose working in a big international firm would be attainable. They have non-discrimination closures and such" (Lieke, 19 years old). Irma highlighted fitting in as a person and having an accepting environment as factors that would facilitate attainability:

To have good and a bad experience in a field is, probably, going to [depend] on whether you like it or not, whether it fits you as a person and whether people are going to accept you. Because if people are not going to accept you it doesn't matter what kind of jobs you do.

(Irma, 25 years old)

Also, some participants perceived careers that were considered more feminine and less dominated by hegemonic masculinity as careers that would ensure an accepting environment in which trans young adults could authentically express themselves:

[Social work] is a very feminine job, you know? For me, it felt like a safe place because people who are learning there and will be in this workplace in the future are also more open minded. So, for me it felt like a good place to start.

(Fabian, 23 years old)

4 | DISCUSSION

Our findings elucidate that developing vocational identity while simultaneously navigating the intricacies of gender identity development is complex and messy—especially so for trans young adults who have to grapple with the additional burden of real and perceived stigma due to their trans identity. Our work contributes by highlighting how gender identity and vocational identity intersect and spotlights that gender transition is an extremely meaningful and pivotal experience in this process. Moreover, it is interlinked with educational attainment, requiring constant (re) negotiations because young adults are grappling with forming vocational aspirations while they are also negotiating how to perform their authentic gender identity, *and* coming to terms with belonging to a marginalized and oppressed community group.

First, we contribute to the extant literature in the field of career development (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2021; Sangjanavanich & Headley, 2013; Scott et al., 2011) to spotlight the importance of gender transition in the development of a vocational identity. Participants in our study tended to, broadly, either prioritize their vocational identity or their gender identity. Some participants held off transitioning until after their education was complete, largely due to anticipated and real stigma due to their gender identity. Even in the Netherlands and Belgium, two relatively “progressive” nations in terms of LGBT rights, trans young persons are still verbally and physically harassed at school (Pizmony-Levy, 2018) and university (Knutson et al., 2021). Other participants in our study left education to transition, again, in anticipation of stigma due to their gender identity. Doing so may influence future career prospects by undermining trans individuals' career capital (e.g., educational attainment) but also by losing relationships and networks that may be beneficial for their vocational future (Köllen, 2018). Indeed, trans people who have transitioned are less likely to be employed, and those who do have a job are more likely to have lower wages than their cisgender counterparts (Ciprikis et al., 2020). In our data, we certainly see evidence of an impact on educational attainment (e.g., lower grades).

At the same time, our findings highlight nuance—there are also benefits that arise from gender transitioning early, which may in turn contribute to the development of one's vocational identity. Indeed, transitioning can also be an enabling process, facilitating the eventual development of trans young adults' vocational identity. This is because transition is a process of self-discovery and trans young adults may not yet feel ready to project themselves into their vocational future and detangle career decisions while transitioning (Dickey et al., 2016)—the journey of self-discovery is still underway. Although vocational interests may temporarily become a peripheral issue, while exploring gender identity takes precedence (Schmidt et al., 2011), trans young adults overcome significant obstacles, develop greater self-knowledge, and also develop skills that can be used in the deciphering and forming their vocational identity. For example, Dickey et al. (2016) found that it is only post-transition that trans individuals build a firm self-awareness as well as career-related self-efficacy (Dickey et al., 2016). Hence, trans young adults who prioritize their gender identity may also be acquiring skills and resources that are necessary for developing a vocational identity, which then allow for educational attainment and facilitate their career-related decisions (Dickey et al., 2016; Holland et al., 1980). These privileges are, however, not equally experienced by trans young adults globally, nor indeed, by all folk in even “progressive” countries, such as The Netherlands and Belgium.

It is difficult to determine the impact of one decision or the other on the current and future career development of our participants, because they were all at very early stages of their career trajectory. Nevertheless, whether participants favored education (at the expense of transition) or sensemaking their gender identity (at the expense of schooling), the motivation was the same: safeguarding themselves from bullying and harassment due to their gender identity. This trade-off may show participants' perception of being authentic and focusing on developing a vocational identity as incompatible choices, both involving sacrifices made for the sake of being accepted by a heteronormative community. Anticipated stigma may, thus, underpin trans individuals' vocational aspirations in young adulthood. This is of importance because, regardless of whether they experience stigma or not, being vigilant of stigmatization can be carried over well beyond gender transition (Verbeek et al., 2020), impacting on trans individuals' mental health

(Chaudoir & Quinn, 2016) and potentially limiting career aspirations and dismissing career opportunities (Budge et al., 2010; Corrigan et al., 2009).

Our second noteworthy finding contributes to the extant literature in organization studies (e.g., Dray et al., 2020; Köllen, 2018; McFadden, 2015; McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2016; Muhr et al., 2016; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016, 2018) and furthers our understanding of the intersection of gender, careers, and vocational identity by demonstrating that vocational identity and trans gender identity are very much interrelated. Indeed, this speaks to Erikson's (1968) view around achieving "wholeness"; for trans young persons, the fractured self needs to come together to form a sense of identity. The vocational identity of the trans youth in our study seemed to emerge, at least partly, because of the experiences they had from being trans. This was a double-edged sword, however, because participants both utilized and channeled their trans identity into aspirations toward careers that appeared meaningful to them, namely activism and supporting others who are marginalized, but also saw their trans identity as inhibiting entrance into some occupations, particularly those who involved working with children and in masculinized environments. Being afraid was a common word in participants' accounts, expressed in the uncertainty about what to expect from particular occupations both because they lacked trans role models and because they feared rejection in job interviews and at work. In formal education, trans young adults may have learned the heteronormative conditions under which one is to be considered a professional (Mizzi, 2013), making them perceive a world of work that is hostile against them. These negative expectations stemming from experiences of oppression are in line with research indicating that trans individuals expect low career-related outcomes (Budge et al., 2010; McFadden, 2015). Moreover, the expectation of being unfairly treated in certain jobs may result in a lowered confidence in being able to find one and in fewer job applications as shown in a previous study with an unemployed population in the United States (Taggar & Kuron, 2016). This puts trans young adults at risk with regard to entering the labor market.

Some career options were perceived as particularly unattainable for participants, such as those involving working with children and teenagers because of anticipated rejection by parents. This is in line with a study conducted in the United States indicating that some parents have problems with educators being LGBT, and in some cases, attempt to remove their children from LGBT educators' classrooms (Wright & Smith, 2015). Other careers considered unattainable were careers in which participants expected to be actively pressured to conform to gender norms. This is in line with Brewster et al.'s (2014) finding that transitioning trans workers perceived gendered occupations as a barrier to their desired gender presentation, and as such, to the expression of their authentic selves. Similarly, Van Gilder (2018) suggested that male-dominated careers are challenging for those who are not heterosexual cisgender men because these occupations are deeply rooted in gender norms, and those who deviate from gendered norms are likely to be marginalized. In some cases, drawn out bureaucratic processes can pose a further barrier to accessing the profession; for instance, MacDonnell and Grigorovich (2012) observe that trans nurses are found registering with their governing organization particularly difficult because of the demographic changes on their personal documents. This is worrisome indeed for trans people who may be pursuing careers based on expected career prospects, rather than vocational interests, which may lead to further segregation of trans people in certain queer-friendly sectors (Ozturk and Tatli, 2018).

We can observe common ground in these perceived occupational barriers: the experience of inhabiting certain bodies that are likely not to be considered a legitimate professional and are unwelcome in certain occupational spaces. Admittedly, in hetero-masculinized occupational sectors and educational institutions, gendered body performances are strictly surveilled so that they adhere to the heteronormative binary sex/gender/sexuality regime (Braun, 2011; Van Gilder, 2018). Female bodies have to appear feminine but "masculine enough" so as not to be sexualized (Braun, 2011). Embodied femininity in male-dominated sectors is also put under suspicion and regarded as unprofessional (Ozturk et al., 2020; Van Gilder, 2018). Meanwhile, male bodies have to praise hegemonic masculinity to avoid being perceived as a weak link and being "othered" (Van Gilder, 2018). Individuals who "fail" at performing gender correctly, in the socially mandated way, are not granted the status or privileges of a socially recognized subject (Gagne et al., 1997). Trans men can indeed "do" or perform hegemonic masculinity—hegemonic performances do not exclusively belong to cisheteronormative bodies (Ozturk et al., 2020). They may also challenge hegemonic masculinity

and incorporate traditionally feminine traits such as the care for others into their own conceptualization of what it means to be a man (Peukert, 2019), as Fabian indicates in his quote. However, “doing” hegemonic masculinity implies a great deal of emotional effort, involving an understanding of spatial cues that indicate where and when a particular masculine performance is honored to be acceptable (Giazitzoglu, 2020). A sense of belonging in hegemonic masculine environments would only be ensured when men follow what contextual cues dictate (Giazitzoglu, 2020). Moreover, even those who are able to perform hegemonic masculinity successfully may not have access to its privileges because of disempowering intersectionalities, such as ethnicity or degrees of whiteness (Sang & Calvard, 2019). Trans young adults in the process of coming to terms with their gender identity and gender presentation with confidence may see this bodily experience as overly demanding and far away from their vocational identity. They may thus avoid careers that impose such tight conditions (e.g., gendered uniforms) for their nonheteronormative beings to be accepted.

Fortunately, participants did not only perceive limitations on access to certain career choices; they also saw opportunities. Some indicated feeling positive about occupations with inclusive organizational environments. This is in line with Brewster et al. (2014) who reported that trans individuals planning to transition do extensive research on organizational diversity management policies. Similarly, Kaplan (2014) suggested that concealable minorities' career choices are potentially made based on their legal protection and safety in the workplace to preserve their integrity and authenticity.

Our third finding of importance is interdisciplinary and merges both career counseling and organization studies to stream together by pointing out that some participants pursued careers that involved helping other minoritized individuals *specifically because of their own experiences of marginalization*. This finding suggests that as trans young adults face meaningful and important challenges due to their gender identity, their vocational identity is oriented toward work that resonates with their lived experiences, so that the work becomes meaningful (Bailey et al., 2019; Schnell et al., 2013). Certainly, trans people would not be the first marginalized group to utilize stigma as a source of meaningfulness; for instance, many domestic abuse activists are survivors, too. Having a marginalized lived experience can orient people to choosing a career paths in that area because it makes them feel meaningful, because it aligns with their personal values, and allows them to use their own personal experience as a resource to help others (Moran et al., 2013). Indeed, participants who formed their vocational identity based on their lived experiences felt compelled, even perceived it as a “calling” (Duffy et al., 2018). Our findings thus illustrate how embodying a stigmatized identity can also be an empowering experience, infusing one's vocational identity with meaningfulness and a desire to help others. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the responsibility for inclusion should rest with marginalized communities. Research shows that some trans employees are tokenized in their organizations, loaded with extra (nonpaid) tasks to promote inclusion that are not recognized for career advancement (Rodríguez et al., 2015; Wada et al., 2019). Allies, queer and straight, must also play a significant role in efforts to achieve social justice (Fingerhut, 2011) as individual support and community allyship are essential for change to happen (Fingerhut, 2011; Forbes & Ueno, 2020).

4.1 | Implications and recommendations

This study has a number of implications for practitioners involved in supporting trans young adults to explore their vocational identity. Indeed, health professionals, educational institutions, and organizational efforts can support the (re)negotiations of vocational identity. First, reaffirmation from psychologists and counselors is crucial for trans young adults' readiness to embark in the exploration of their vocational aspirations (Wada et al., 2019). With past experiences of discrimination and an expectation that this will happen in the future, health professionals can help trans young adults to understand their identity and develop greater self-acceptance (Austin, 2016), and resilience strategies (Pantelic et al., 2019). Our research shows that, even in countries that are (allegedly) at the forefront of LGBTIQ+ rights, trans people still encounter professionals who do not have adequate awareness of trans issues and the role they as professionals (can) play in their development. This echoes existing research examining the state of

career counseling with trans populations, highlighting a “limited counselor competence” (Wada et al., 2019, p. 255). That same study called for additional research on trans individuals' career development experiences. Our study meets that call with empirical data that help us to better understand the unique challenges that trans individuals face during young adulthood.

The finding of a lack of trans role models also points to the silencing of gender issues that occur in organizational contexts, particularly in educational settings, that fuel the stigmatization of trans persons. This is frequently done under the troubling heteronormative notion of “protecting” children from “deviant others” (Neary, 2017). In this silenced context, trans young adults are likely to grow up without accessible role models, as shown in our study, which makes it difficult to see themselves in others and to build an authentic identity (Austin, 2016). The reality is that educational institutions play a significant part in trans youths' development (Austin, 2016). Indeed, participants in this study saw themselves forced to choose between safeguarding themselves or pursuing a vocational future: some changed schools, dropped out, or delayed their transition to avoid unwanted school experiences. Research shows that positive experiences in formal education, such as being recognized in all their diversity, being protected from discriminatory behavior, and being supported with the corresponding resources (Austin, 2016; Gray et al., 2016; Neary, 2017), can effectively smooth trans youths' process of identity sensemaking while permitting vocational identity development. It is thus educational institutions' responsibility to provide trans-affirming training for educators, career counselors, and coaches to build inclusive spaces. The nuanced interplay between gender identity and vocational identity needs to be recognized and taken into account when guiding and supporting trans young persons at educational establishments. Further work is also required in the field of psychometrics, for example, by appreciating the importance of gender identity in the formation of vocational identity, incorporating questions around gender identity (and other intersectional identities) in questionnaires. Other practices could include adopting a nonbinary conceptualization of gender, avoiding separation of activities and classes by sex, and to attend gender diversity in course content (Austin, 2016). Of course, as intolerant actions sometimes come from parents (Gray et al., 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015), involving family members in interventions is also critical. This could ease trans youth's experience at school and facilitate the development of their gender identity without having to impose major costs on their educational attainment and the development of their vocational identity.

Finally, the results of this study also make a contribution to the intersection of gender, careers, and vocational identity in organizations. Organizations, sometimes as the contexts in which vocational aspirations are embodied and toward which they are projected, have a great deal of work to do. Organizations reinforce heteronormative systems of oppression that exist in society in many ways (Corlett et al., 2022), from space configuration (e.g., binary bathrooms) and the creation of norms that regulate behavior (e.g., gendered dress-codes) (Bendl et al., 2009; Brewster et al., 2014) to the selection of leaders who embody heteronormativity representing and dictating acceptable ways to be (Amstutz et al., 2020). This reinforcement of heteronormativity even occurs in legal contexts that are supportive of LGBT issues, such as the one of this study and in queer-friendly organizational environments (Corlett et al., 2022). Notwithstanding, our study shows that the legal and organizational contexts of trans people can facilitate their experiences and vocational development. Research has indeed shown that there are several actions that organizations can take to address heteronormativity, and HRM has an important role to play in creating a more inclusive climate for trans workers. First, actions should start even before recruitment and organizations should pay attention to their corporate websites and the inclusive (or lack thereof) messages that are being portrayed therein (Beauregard et al., 2018). Data from our study show that some trans youth forgo certain professions due to a lack of nonheteronormative role models; hence organizations can, and should, do more to attract diverse talent and promote representation (Bendl et al., 2009; Courtney, 2014; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). At the recruitment and selection stage, organizations must be mindful of lawful protection and ethical HRM practices. For example, trans youth applying for work experience or internships may have what appear to be discrepancies in their application documents (e.g., birth certificates, driving licenses, and degree qualifications) and this can be very stressful for applicants to navigate (Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2013). Even providing a work reference can be a challenge for some applicants who are fearful of being outed (Pepper & Lorah, 2008). For example, in Ireland, up to 7% of trans job applicants chose not

to submit a reference from their previous employer as to protect their gender history (McNeil et al., 2013). This may also be the case for trans young persons who are fearful of asking their teachers or university professors to write a reference in their new name.

Within the organization, HRM policies that prohibit interpersonal discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people (Kelly et al., 2020; McFadden, 2015) and the creation of nonbinary inclusive spaces (e.g., toilets and lockers) (Kelly et al., 2020; Rumens, 2018) are also necessary to build a friendly and inclusive culture. It is also imperative to have clear and transparent complaint procedures that are a recourse to staff without fear of victimization. This is especially so for trans young adults who are entering employment perhaps for the first time and may not be knowledgeable on who to turn to or how to report discrimination and harassment. Additionally, policies to support transitioning trans employees that ensure confidentiality must be in place (Kelly et al., 2020; McFadden, 2015), and most importantly, these *must* be taken seriously by the company lest they are perceived as yet another box ticking activity (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). Leadership by example to create a genuinely inclusive culture and safe spaces are imperative. Diversity and inclusion training that raises awareness of trans experiences at work is important, as is including trans individuals in decision-making processes (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). Employers could also offer career counseling for trans employees in transition (Rumens, 2018), but care must be taken by HRM and managers not to out or marginalize trans workers with good intentions. A positive first disclosure experience is particularly important (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010); for trans youth, this may coincide with their first employment experience; hence, HRM has a pivotal responsibility to ensure that any potential first experiences of “coming out” set a positive precedent. When organizations take steps in this direction, they are not only building spaces free of exclusion, but they also removing career-related boundaries for people who do not meet heteronormative standards, as trans youth might be.

4.2 | Limitations and future directions

As we followed the recommendations set out by Vincent (2018) in conducting this study, we remain mindful that our identities as cisgender women and our positions as academic researchers interplay with data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Throughout the empirical stages, we remained humble and open to learning from our participants who shared intimate lived experiences with us. Throughout the write-up stage, we welcome prompts and nudges from the peer-review process as to reveal further insights. We also acknowledge that we interviewed a greater number of trans men than trans women in our study. Some of our participants indicated that the experiences for trans men and trans women during transition differed and this has also been acknowledged by previous research (Verbeek et al., 2020). However, our participants did not mention differences in vocational aspirations impacted by their gender identity. Only one participant mentioned that there are gender stereotypes that made him question his career choices but dismissed them by stressing that it is helping people that was most important to him. Further exploration is required to explicate the intricacies that may emerge as a result of gendered differences. Indeed, trans people are not a homogenous group, but include a range of wonderfully diverse folk with a multitude of voices that need to be heard (Beauregard et al., 2018).

We also note that our participants reside in countries where, at least on the policy level, there are some legal protections awarded to LGBTIQ+ persons. This means that participants' experiences, despite the myriad of complexities noted, happened in a rather supportive sociocultural context, possibly facilitating the development of self-confidence against the backdrop of—albeit imperfect—legal protection. It is very important to acknowledge that, globally, the experiences, outcomes, and exclusions of trans young adults vary substantially, and these are especially profound in countries with limited LGBTIQ+ rights. Further research should explore intersectionalities of identities as this will contribute to improved cross-cultural understanding of trans young adults' vocational aspirations and vocational identity.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this study, we contribute to the understanding of how young persons who embody a transgender identity negotiate and renegotiate their vocational identity. Our results have shown that transition and education are interlinked, and that career decisions are made in a way that requires negotiating between gender identity and vocational identity development, at times, favoring one over the other as a means of safeguarding oneself. We also found that transition can contribute positively to vocational identity through increased self-efficacy and self-confidence and a greater readiness to understand their vocational interests and goals. Despite this growth in confidence, overall, participants were fearful that their career choices would be limited because of their gender identity and perceived a lack of trans career-related role models to look up to and follow. Also, when exploring access to different career trajectories, gender identity was at the core of decision processes: participants negotiated vocational identity based on how they expected to be perceived by others (welcome or excluded) or how their gender identity could make a positive contribution to others. These findings point to the need for joint work of health professionals, organizations, and educational institutions—who influence the vocational identity of trans people—to mitigate the inequality and marginalization that trans young persons' face from early education through later in the labor market.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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