



Language and Identity Assertion by Binary and Non-Binary Users Online

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Abstract: This study explores the language used by binary and non-binary individuals in online discourse, focusing on the linguistic strategies employed to express gender identity. This study specifically examines gender expression within the Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and others (TIQ+ in the LGBTIQ+) community, excluding discussions on sexuality. The study examines the language used by binary and non-binary individuals identifying the patterns and similarities in the language usage. Adopting qualitative analysis, the findings in this study reveals that non-binary individuals frequently coin new terms to articulate their identities, many of which are yet to be formally recognized in the English lexicon. As a result, these terms may appear unfamiliar to those outside non-binary communities or less engaged in online discourse. Additionally, the study highlights that non-binary individuals often adopt a defensive or assertive linguistic style, which serves as a means of affirming their existence and challenging societal norms. This study contributes to the growing field of language, identity, and online discourse, shedding light on how gender identity is linguistically negotiated in digital spaces. This research also contributes to the growing field of language, specifically sociolinguistics and has a significant impact on language because language is what we use to express our identity.

Keywords: Binary, Non-Binary, Linguistic Strategies, English Lexicon, TQ+ and LGBTIQ+.

Research Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the biological features that I may possess". Traditional concepts of gender no longer account for the wide range of identities Gender identity has long been a and expressions that exist outside of the binary foundation of human social organization, framework because there are individuals who no influencing people's experiences, opportunities, longer want to be identified as male or female, and interactions in society. It has always been a they come up with identities like genderfluid and binary perspective that classifies people as either transgender. The expansion of gender beyond male or female based on biological sex but in male and female has led to a significant impact recent times, gender identity refers to the on language particularly in online conversations personal sense of an individual towards their

Most of the phrases, expressions and own gender, that is "how I feel or who I feel my vocabularies

used by non-binary individuals are identity should be is what I claim it to be unfamiliar to others who are not conversant with social media and the online space especially those in countries where non-binary individuals cannot freely express themselves. (Brag *et al.*, 2020) in their study discovered that young people between the ages of 14-16 often make use of a more diverse language to describe gender identity and expression. Gender identity has become a dynamic and evolving concept, challenging traditional binary constructs especially with the formation of new words. For example the word "Cisgender" was coined in 1994 and it became lexicalized and appeared in dictionaries in the year 2015. As digital spaces become crucial platforms for identity expression, understanding the different ways individuals navigate and perform their gender identities online is essential. Non-binary individuals may identify as both, neither, or a combination of male and female genders, or may identify with a different gender altogether, which is why this

study is important, as it aims to shed light on the expressions and vocabulary used by non-binary individuals when expressing their identities.

Online discourses play an important role in identity formation because of their accessibility, interaction, and ability to connect people across geographical borders. Online platforms have a lower barrier to access than offline surroundings. Individuals can engage in debates, exchange experiences, and express their identities without regard for geographical location or societal standards. This accessibility is especially crucial for marginalised communities, such as nonbinary individuals, who may face hurdles to selfexpression in physical spaces. Many online platforms allow users to connect anonymously or under pseudonyms, giving a level of privacy and security that real contact may lack. This anonymity allows people to explore and express aspects of their identities that they might be unwilling to share in face-to-face interactions, generating a sense of freedom and authenticity. It also allows people with similar identities or experiences to bond together and build communities of support and solidarity.

Theoretical Review

(Crowley, 2023) in their thesis examines how metalinguistic discussions within transgender communities in South Carolina are shaped by various social factors like gender, age, race, and location. The dissertation also explores the various language ideologies that trans South Carolinians encounter when discussing trans language practices. It focuses on how transgender Southerners justify their lexical and grammatical choices when confronted with normative cisgender ideologies. This group has been underrepresented in trans linguistic research. The dissertation revealed that regional identity and language ideology influence Trans language use. The research analysed the linguistic beliefs of transgender individuals when debating and assessing appropriate language for the Trans community.

Using qualitative data analysis, (Kelien and Karjo, 2023) in their study of "Language Features of Transgenders as their Gender Representation in Digital Culture", examines how transgender people utilise language and are represented in digital media, including YouTube and movie channels like Netflix. Previous research according to the authors suggests that men tend to be more assertive and have higher self-esteem than women, which raises the question what about transgender? This is the primary focus of this research. The study found that transgender women use six out of 10 female language features while preserving two masculine language features. Trans men keep three female language features while using four male language

features. The study argues that gender should be viewed as a multidimensional construct. The author however suggests that further research on language and gender is necessary to recognise multidimensional identity in the digital environment.

(Elmer, 2019) in a morpho-semantic analysis adopts a qualitative research that focuses on the language and linguistic terms used in the context of homosexuality. The study takes a morphosemantic approach, looking at how word structure and meaning (morphology and semantics) evolve and are used to characterise and communicate homosexual experiences. The study discusses the evolution and usage of homosexuality-related phrases, such as how particular words have changed over time or carries different implications in different contexts. It investigates how the meanings of terms associated to homosexuality have changed throughout time, reflecting changes in society views and understandings of homosexuality. The analysis takes into account how language influences and is influenced by cultural attitudes towards homosexuality, as well as how language can perpetuate or challenge stereotypes. The study examines new words or phrases coined by the LGBTQ+ community to explain parts of the homosexual experience that were previously nameless or inadequately covered. Elmer discusses how language influences the development and expression of identity in the homosexual community. The morpho-semantic method enables a more detailed investigation of how language is used to express and shape homosexual experiences. Elmer's work helps to deepen our understanding of the interaction of language, identity, and culture by analysing word form and meaning.

(Holmes, 2006) in her study in "Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity through Workplace Discourse" gave a detailed exploration on how gender identities are expressed, constructed and negotiated in a professional setting. Holmes examines how gender affects relationships, power dynamics, and communication styles in the workplace using sociolinguistics as a guide. Her research advances our knowledge of how discourse may influence professional identity and career advancement by reflecting and challenging established gender stereotypes. Holmes discusses gender-specific communication traits such as directness, politeness, assertiveness, and empathy and finds clear commonalities in the ways men and women speak at work. She looks at how these communication patterns are socially created rather than innate, with males frequently adopting competitive and statusoriented language and women generally socialised to use cooperative and rapportfocused language.

METHOD

This study is a qualitative comparative analysis that is aimed at understanding the linguistics strategies used by binary and nonbinary individuals when expressing their identities in online discourse. Participants in this study are members of the LGBTQ community, specifically non-binary and individuals as well as binary individuals. The data for this study was gotten from several social media platforms including Twitter, Instagram and Reddit. A total number of 20 textual and pictorial data from online platforms, such as social media posts, like Twitter and Instagram posts, forum threads, blog entries, and comments, about non-binary identity were collected, however only a few were displayed in this research.

Qualitative analysis of the obtained data was carried out to uncover themes, patterns, and linguistic elements associated with non-binary identity in online discourses. The data was extensively coded to find recurring themes, patterns, linguistic markers, tone and style with a focus on language use, and identity

expression. The results of this investigation were understood in the context of gender identity and the role of language in shaping and reflecting gender identity in online spaces. The theoretical frameworks used in this study are social constructionism, discourse analysis, and gender/queer theory.

RESULTS

Discourse analysis and multimodal analysis are useful frameworks for studying online representations of non-binary identity by examining the language, visual aspects, and social interactions that influence the discourse on gender variety.

Non-binary people utilise a variety of language skills and methods to express themselves, challenge gender stereotypes, and promote a more inclusive society. These linguistic practices not only help people express themselves, but they also contribute to broader cultural shifts that promote more awareness and respect for varied gender identities.



Figure 1: A tweet from Twitter

The tweet in figure 1 challenges the misconception that gender-neutral pronouns are confusing or grammatically incorrect, framing this belief as a deliberate act of bigotry rather than a legitimate linguistic issue. This argument underscores the power dynamics in discourse, where refusal to respect pronouns becomes an act of erasure or invalidation of identity. From a social constructionist perspective, this tweet illustrates how non-binary identity are constructed and asserted through language. By emphasizing the right to choose pronouns and rejecting imposed binary labels, the post resists societal norms and reinforces the fluidity of gender expression. This example highlights a key linguistic strategy used by non-binary individuals to articulate identities which includes the active use of pronouns (they/them) challenges traditional gender

binaries. The post also employs corrective discourse, directly addressing and rejecting narratives (e.g., "grammatical confusion") that delegitimize nonbinary identity. The tweet uses a matter-of-fact tone with a slight confrontational edge. Words like "bigots" and phrases such as "pretend that grammatical confusion exists" frame the issue as a deliberate act of ignorance. This reflects how non-binary discourse often combines assertiveness and educational intent addressing misconceptions while demanding respect for identity choices.

Pronouns here function as a linguistic marker that shapes discourse around non-binary identity. By consistently using they/them, the author normalizes gender-neutral pronouns and underscores their role as

tools of identity recognition. The comment under the tweet challenges the original post by suggesting that using gender-neutral pronouns (such as them/their) can cause confusion in certain contexts, particularly when referencing multiple individuals. This reflects a common argument among individuals who are hesitant to adopt or accept gender-neutral language, often citing "grammatical confusion" as a justification.

Language Use and Linguistic Markers

The tone of the comment is somewhat critical but restrained. Phrases like "I normally enjoy your stuff" function as a softening device to establish rapport before presenting disagreement. This mitigates the directness of the critique, making it appear less confrontational. The comment implicitly highlights the challenge of gender-neutral pronouns, framing them/their as potentially confusing in repeated contexts. However, this reasoning neglects the broader social purpose of inclusive pronoun use, which prioritizes respect for identity over strict adherence to grammatical convention. By pointing out the difficulty of replacing pronouns repeatedly, the commenter attempts to support their argument with a

functional linguistic critique. This argument aligns with traditional grammatical norms but overlooks the adaptability of language in evolving to meet societal needs. The comment reveals a resistance to linguistic change, which is often observed in discussions about gender-neutral pronouns. There are different ways in which non binary individual use to articulate their identities. This includes:

- a. Pronouns and gender neutral language: Many non-binary people use gender-neutral pronouns such as "they/them," "ze/zir," "xe/xem," and others. This option avoids the gender dichotomy represented by "he" or "she" and promotes more inclusive communication.
- Creative Pronoun Use: Some people develop or use unique pronouns that better reflect their identity, such as "ze/zir" or "ey/em." This can help them identify their personal identity from traditional gender stereotypes.
- Avoiding Gendered Pronouns: Some persons prefer to use their name instead of any pronouns, or "they" as a singular pronoun, to avoid gendering entirely.



Figure 2: A blog post from a parent

Figure 2 presents a detailed reflection on the evolving relationship between a parent and their nonbinary child as the parent learns to navigate the complexities of non-binary gender identity and inclusive language. Initially, the parent was comfortable with their child's request for "she/they" pronouns, as it allowed them to hold onto the traditional gendered speech they had always used while still supporting their child. The parent uses this moment to convey a sense of ease in their support "I totally support what makes you happy" which implies that they felt their support could be given without altering much of their own behaviour or language. However, as the child increasingly identified with "they"

as their sole pronoun, the parent found themselves facing a more significant challenge. The difficulty of adjusting is expressed through the parent's self-awareness of their linguistic habits, admitting that their speech is "so very gendered," a realization that leads to a reassessment of their language choices. The parent seems taken aback by how much work is required to shift from using "she" to "they," describing it as "slightly more work," which highlights the effort needed to unlearn deeply ingrained linguistic habits. This section of the tweet indicates the emotional labour involved in the parent's growth process, an effort that is framed positively as a "learning experience." In this way, the parent underscores their

commitment to being supportive by embracing the challenge, even if it means confronting their own biases and habits. The phrase "everyone wins again" serves to reinforce the idea that, despite the difficulty of changing language use, the effort brings about a more positive outcome for the child's happiness and the parent's growth.

This tweet demonstrates a complex negotiation of language and identity, where the parent navigates their commitment to supporting their child's gender identity while also grappling with the linguistic and emotional effort required to respect non-binary pronouns fully. It highlights the intersection of personal transformation and

support for non-binary identity, illustrating the often difficult but rewarding process of unlearning and rethinking the language we use to refer to others. The parent's struggle with "they" not only speaks to the challenge of incorporating non-binary pronouns into their vocabulary but also reflects a larger societal struggle with moving beyond binary gender constructs. This tweet exemplifies the emotional and cognitive work involved in both adopting non-binary pronouns and redefining ones understanding of gender, further underlining the importance of language in constructing and expressing gender identity in contemporary discourse.



Figure 3: Different pronouns used by binary and non-binary gender

b. Self-identification and Terminology Neologisms and Self-Labeling: Non-binary people frequently coin or utilise names that more accurately describe their identity, such as

"genderfluid," "agender," "bigender," or "demiboy/girl." These phrases help to describe the breadth of gender experiences beyond the binary.

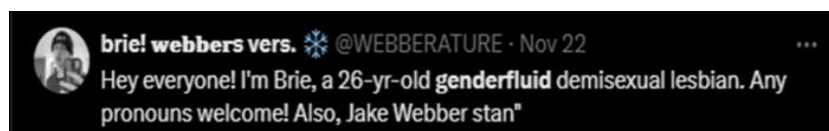


Figure 4: Snippet from X to emphasise selflabelling

This brief post shown in figure 4 above introduces Brie, a 26-year-old genderfluid demisexual lesbian, and offers a casual yet inclusive statement about pronouns. The use of "Any pronouns welcome!" is significant as it conveys Brie's openness to various gender expressions and reflects the fluidity of their gender identity. By stating that all pronouns are acceptable, Brie signals a rejection of rigid gender norms, indicating that their identity does not conform to traditional binary expectations. This approach demonstrates a commitment to flexibility in self-identification and invites others to respect their individuality without imposing specific pronouns or categories.

This post is a prime example of how social media allows for a simplified yet deeply meaningful assertion of self. It is casual but reflective of a broader,

more inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. The brevity of the post and the language used highlight the ease with which individuals who identify as non-binary or gender fluid can express their identities, making it clear that their gender fluidity does not require rigid pronoun systems.

Additionally, Brie's statement, "Any pronouns welcome," highlights the possibility for others to actively participate in validating and respecting diverse gender identities. The open-endedness of their pronoun preference encourages a flexible understanding of gender, in line with broader efforts to challenge binary gender norms. Some people may also expressly reject traditional gender labels, using terminology like "genderqueer" or "non-binary" to indicate their reluctance to conform to preset categories.

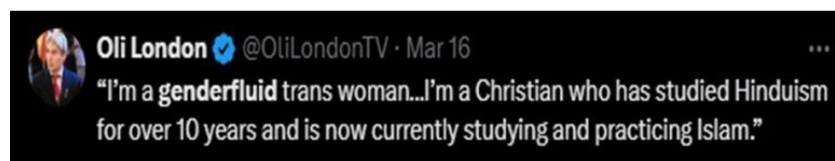


Figure 5: Snippet from X to emphasise selflabelling

A bit different from figure 4, figure 5 provides a concise but rich insight into the author's multifaceted identity. The declaration "I'm a genderfluid trans woman" serves as a primary assertion of their gender identity, identifying as both genderfluid and trans, which challenges traditional binary gender categories. The term "genderfluid" suggests an understanding of gender as dynamic and flexible, while "trans woman" shows the individual's journey of transitioning from male to female, indicating a complex relationship with gender that does not conform to static norms. The combination of these terms reflects an intersection of identities that defy societal expectations and embrace a broader, more inclusive perspective on gender. What stands out is the individual's ability to express and balance multiple aspects of their identity without prioritizing one over the other.

The poster's openness in sharing their religious and gender identities reinforces the power of online discourse to allow individuals to express the complexity of their identities, offering a more holistic view of who they are and how they navigate the world. This posts may seem to some as confusing because „genderfluid“ is mostly used to represent consistent change in gender while trans woman indicates that the poster has transitioned into a woman and given the context of non-binary expressions, unless the poster plans to transition back to a male, the term genderfluid may have been misused.

c. Syntax and Sentence Structure Non-Gendered Descriptions: When describing themselves or others, non-binary people often employ non-gendered language.

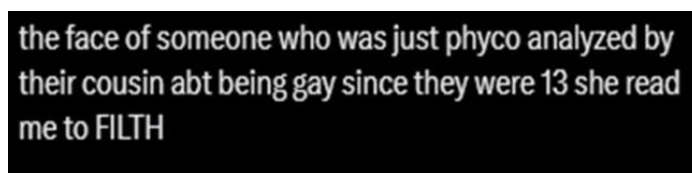


Figure 6: Snippet from X to emphasise selflabelling

In Figure 6, the author of the post described themselves as someone while highlighting a personal experience of being analysed or critiqued, likely in a judgmental or invasive manner, by a family member about the poster's sexual orientation. The phrase "the face of someone who was just psychoanalyzed by their cousin" suggests an emotional reaction to being subject to unsolicited scrutiny, particularly regarding one's sexual identity. The phrase "since they were 13" shows the poster's nonconformity to binary classification which further emphasises the use of "the face of someone" instead of directing stating their gender. Overall, the post provides a glimpse into the complex,

sometimes painful interactions that individual, particularly those within the LGBTQ+ community, experience from family members or loved ones. The poster is reflecting on how their sexual identity like gay has been scrutinized, potentially without their consent or comfort, by someone who may not fully understand or accept it.

d. Identity assertion in discourse Non-binary individuals can assert their gender identification by stating it openly in introductions or written communication. This ensures that their identity is recognized and accepted as seen in FIG 4.

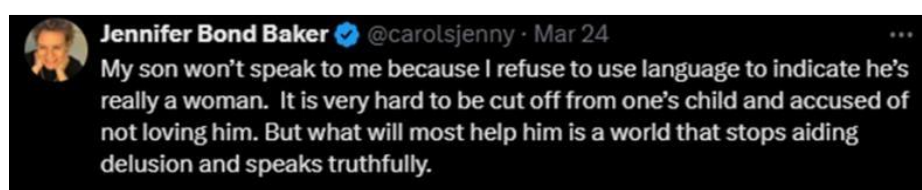


Figure 7: Snippet from X to exemplify identity assertion

Figure 7 portrays a deeply personal conflict between a parent and a child over the parent's refusal to recognize the child's gender identity. The writer hurts and feels frustrated by the distant relationship with their son, who has stopped speaking to the parent over the parent's refusal to use gender-affirming language with other people. The wording "I refuse to use the language to indicate he's really a woman" reflects the parent's rejection of the child's gender transition, signalling that the parent believes the child's gender identity can be accurately characterized as a delusion, and not a genuine expression of who the child is. This posts shows identity assertion but from the binary point of view. The use of son, woman and him shows that the poster who is the parent of the child does not accept the identity the child is trying to impose. She makes use of binary pronouns to emphasize her stance on the child's biological identity.

The line "What will most help him is a world that stops aiding delusion and speaks truthfully" is particularly revealing, as it highlights the parent's framing of support for their child's gender identity as a lie. This is a common view among more traditional and orthodox thinking on gender, which sees gender as binary and static. Here, the language of the parent "delusion" and "truthfully" indicates a resistance to the acceptance of non-binary or trans identities, portraying the child as confused.

e. Community specific jargon and slang Non-binary individuals often create slang and jargon to represent their unique experiences and subtleties. This language promotes a sense of community and understanding. Some people reclaim derogatory terminology in order to positively confirm their identity.



Figure 8: A tweet from Twitter about misgendering and the responses from others

f. Digital communication and symbols Pronoun Signs: In emails and social media, people can

put their pronouns in their signature or profile to clearly express their gender identification.



Figure 9: Snippet from X to exemplify use of pronouns on profile

Emojis and Symbols:

Emojis are an essential component of both binary and non-binary expressions, with some distinct

patterns. Nonbinary people may use emojis or symbols to represent their identification, such as the rainbow flag, non-binary flag, or gender-neutral icons.

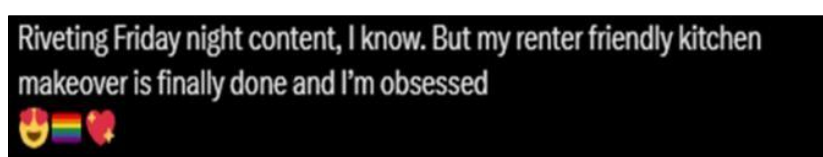


Figure 10: Snippet from X to exemplify the use of the rainbow flag emoji

Binary posts often featured emojis that matched traditional gender representations, such as the muscle and crown for men, and nail polish and dancer for women. As shown in FIG19 above, the post seems playful and celebratory and focuses on the completion of a kitchen makeover. On the surface, this content itself has nothing to do with the debate surrounding gender identity, but the rainbow flag depicted along with the love with star emojis has meaning in the LGBTQ+ space. This shows how nonbinary individuals assert their identity and stance and also forms solidarity with their counterparts. The rainbow flag emoji is known to symbolize LGBTQ+ pride and pride itself relating to

diversity and acceptance; love with star emoji usually symbolizes affection or admiration. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ identifying symbols, when utilized within the framework of an individual accomplishment, can be a reflection of the user's alignment with the queer community or even support for it, effectively linking personal expression and pride into everyday actions. As such, the use of such markers of identity, such as emojis, shows how digital language and symbols can be used as a practice of subtle performativity, in which one marks their being or social character or position in a social or cultural group.

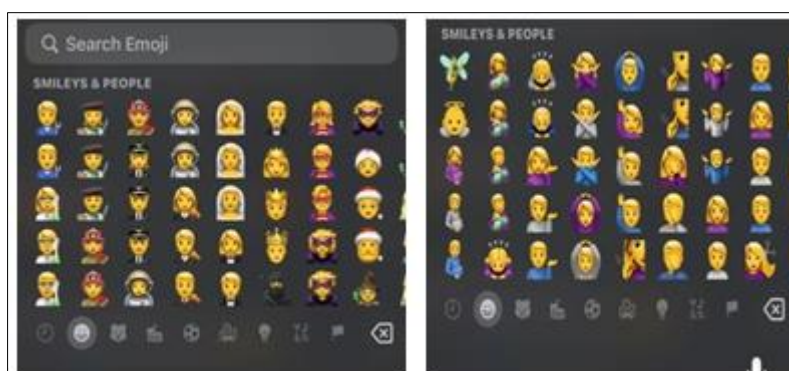


Figure 11: Emojis

The image in figure 13 shows the emoji that are used during social interaction to express opinions and interact online. It can be seen that there are three gender represented-male, female and non-binary. The gender usually used by non-binary individuals who do identify as neither male nor female.

Non-binary also makes use of memes more varied and concerned, challenging or rejecting gender norms. A popular meme on X featured a cartoon of a sakura war figure, with the caption: "...for us, male or female doesn't matter..."



Figure 12: Snippet from X on a non-binary meme challenging gender norms

The post for figure 12 is a cartoon image of a man and a woman supposedly holding hands with a caption from the supposed woman and has a gender fluid message and goes against traditional binary gender lines. The caption, "I am me. Male or female, meh, it doesn't matter to us, does it?" Are intended to convey that the speaker is rallying around a perspective in which gender is not a factor in relationships or in social existence as a whole. It expresses a notion that placing value on who we are as individuals and our shared humanity as people is more valuable than assigning qualities, traits, or behaviours to specific sexes. Linguistically, the insertion of the phrase "male or female doesn't matter" suggests a greater awareness and questioning of the binary nature of gender, suggesting that the speaker identifies as gender-fluid or at the very least, less rigidly adherent to traditional gender roles. The first-person "I am me" form conveys the notion of personal autonomy in the sense that the speaker is defining herself independently of the demands of society and in terms of her true self. It's a sort of renouncement of the notion that a person's gender should define their place in society and their relationships with others.

DISCUSSION

This study helps to better understand how binary and non-binary individuals use verbal and visual tactics to present themselves and mark their identity in online discourse. Some significant findings emerged from the study in terms of language, visuals (emojis and memes). Pronoun Use as an Identifier One of the most significant findings was the key role played by pronouns in constructing identity, for both the non-binary and for binary people. Non-binary people especially embrace pronouns as personal declaration, political manoeuvre. When people use "they/them" pronouns or neo pronouns like "ze/zir," it's not just an identity claim it's an act of resistance to the gender binary. This approach not only serves gender identity, but also motivates education for others, challenging societal norms and advocating greater inclusivity. Binary individuals only think to add their pronouns when in conversations specifically about gender. This indicates a more passive way of engaging with pronoun visibility, where sharing pronouns tends to

be motivated by solidarity with non-binary people or allyship.

Binary posts tend to reflect a more rigid and immutable view of gender, where pronouns act more as a signal for social signalling and less as a statement of the speaker's self-awareness. Tone and Style of Discourse.

Binary and non-binary people also used language very differently in tone and style. Nonbinary people tended to use a more reflective and exploratory tone in their posts, focusing on personal journeys of self-discovery and what it takes to negotiate one's gender identity. The language they used was filled with inclusion, stating the need for society at large to embrace the notion of identity beyond the twodimensional gender-specific binary understanding. By using their language, nonbinary people advocate, seeking to change mind sets and awareness about the nuanced nature of gender. Binary individuals often used a more prescriptive or inspirational tone in their posts. It became popular to label people, celebrating masculinity or femininity as absolute and static. And while there were some occasional mentions of empowerment, it was usually within the limits of established gender norms. He was focused on winning the self under traditional labels, rather than subverting or expanding them.

Hashtags and Thematic Devices

Hashtags helped frame and amplify the individual-discourses of each of them. Nonbinary individuals embrace hashtags like #NonBinaryPride, #GenderEquality, and #EnbyLove as a means of community building, personal sharing, and social activism. These hashtags foster solidarity by allowing people with similar identities to connect and also increasing awareness and promoting inclusiveness in society. What purpose does antimony serve in hashtags with non-binary people, and how are we to look at them with well-defined hashtags during and after the campaign is over? On the other hand, binary hashtags, such as #ManUp and #WomanStrong, function to support traditional gender norms. Although they might empower some within existing gender structures, they are rarely functions of challenge, transgression and

destruction-but rather, the opposite, as such structures bind and build themselves through the substance of their distortion. They refer to the gap between discourses about the binary and discourses about the non-binary, where the latter try to dismantle and redefine gender while the former keep insisting on the validity of predetermined categories. The Role of Community in Identity Formation The results also suggest that online communities play a key role in building gender identities, especially for non-binary people. By utilizing inclusive language, solidarity hashtags, and conversations around personal identity, these non-binary folks create a sense of community in digital spaces. They are not only a source of support but also a hub for education and advocacy. Non-binary discourse is nuanced, emphasizing collective visibility and mutual respect while reinforcing celebratory versus stigmatized environments for gender diversity.

In binary spaces, community exists but mostly centres around insisting upon the individual identity and individual identity experience based on society. A lot of the identities expressed by binary people online can actually be phrased as an empowerment of gender norms too rather than necessarily as something that disrupts them. So whereas both communities use language as a means of claiming an identity, the kind of community they create and interact with says a lot about their relationship to gender: one is about consistency with tradition, while the other is about fluidity and change.

CONCLUSION

Language is used for self-expression and identity assertion and this study sheds light on how binary and non-binary individuals navigate linguistic and visual resources online to signal their identity a lot more detailed than some preceding research. This study also outline the underlying features of online talk about gender, the effect of race and culture on the construction of gendered identities, and the way that pronouns, emojis, and memes participated in the creation of gendered talk online. While this research has huge implications around such issues as creating welcoming, non-exclusionary digital spaces and how technology can reflect and shape identity in both negative and positive ways. Because gender identities are an everevolving concept, figuring out how they are expressed in the digital space will still be key to making the internet a more inclusive and equal space.

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