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# The inescapable cage of a man and a woman: Experiences of non-binary people with gender identity (non-)affirmation in the context of a gendered language

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Experiencing a lack of identity verification is an issue which most of the transgender community struggles with. Non-binary people's daily struggle for affirmation may be even more difficult in a binary gendered language, which forces speakers to grammatically encode gender distinctions in speech. As such, this study explores such experiences and their impact on non-binary individuals in Italian context.

**Methods:** We explored the experiences of 13 non-binary Italians via semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited through social media and LGBTQ+ groups in Italy and the UK. Reflexive thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the data.

**Results:** Three main themes were developed: (1) *Structures of Erasure* (subthemes: *Unspoken Selves, Gender binary prison, and Institutional binary gender fixation*), (2) *The Labor of Affirmation, and* (3) *Affirmative Networks*. Our findings suggest that non-binary adults perceived the lack of appropriate and accessible language as being limiting in capturing, expressing, and affirming their identities. For many, this was associated with negative implications for their well-being. Nevertheless, they identified that their families, friends, and community created safe spaces where they felt recognized.

**Discussion:** These results expand current understanding of the linguistic mechanisms behind non-affirmation and emphasize the importance of having a support network and more accessible gender-neutral Italian for improving mental health and identity affirmation. Furthermore, these findings contribute to our understanding of non-affirmation as not just an act done by other people, but also the inability to express one's gender in a way that is congruent with their inner self-concept.

## KEYWORDS

gendered language; gender identity; grammatical gender; non-binary; (non-)affirmation

## Introduction

Language is a powerful tool we use to express things such as our plans for the day, moods, thoughts, and identity (Hord, 2016; Philips & Boroditsky, 2003). However, the language we speak can also influence us and shape the world around us (Philips & Boroditsky, 2003). One of the documented ways through which language does this is through grammatical structures, such as grammatical gender (Jakiela & Ozier, 2020).

Although its origins and evolution are still being questioned, people generally assume the function of grammatical gender is to clarify and disambiguate linguistic relations (Foundalis, 2002; Wheeler, 1899). Languages where grammatical

gender is salient and prominent are so-called binary gendered languages (e.g. French, Spanish, Italian, or Hebrew). In these languages, nouns are classified as either masculine or feminine (Gygax et al., 2019), and other accompanying parts of speech, like pronouns, adjectives, verbs, or definite articles, need to agree in gender with the noun (Hord, 2016). These words are inflected in different ways based on the specific grammatical gender they refer to. For example, a “book” in Spanish is masculine, while a “bed” is feminine. This gender would in turn impact other parts of speech such as verbs and adjectives, such that a “small book” would be “*un libro pequeño*” while a “small bed” would be “*una cama*

pequeña”—resulting in different forms of the adjective “*small*” (i.e. ending in either [-o] or [-a]).

Notably, speakers of binary gendered languages are forced to make such gender distinctions effectively every time they speak, and it is usually not possible to avoid these in natural speech production. While the gender of inanimate nouns (e.g. a book) is typically assigned arbitrarily, for personal nouns and pronouns it usually correlates with the sex or the visible gender identity of the referent (Gygax et al., 2019).

In contrast, gender-neutral languages such as English and Swedish do not have gender classes for most inanimate nouns. Instead, gender is only marked through pronouns (e.g. *he*, *she* or *they*) and the use of specific gendered nouns like “*grandmother*” or “*niece*” (Hekanaho, 2015; Hord, 2016). Furthermore, these languages do not use different linguistic forms to accompany different gendered (pro)nouns. For example, both a *niece* and a *nephew* would be described using the same form of the adjective “*small*.” As such, gender markings are less prominent in such languages compared to binary gendered languages.

There also exist other languages with various levels of gendered-ness, ranging from languages that incorporate gender-neutral grammar to genderless languages (Gygax et al., 2019). The variations in the way gender is present in languages offer venues for research into how its presence or absence affects cognition and how certain grammatical rules may create unique biases or challenges for a group of people. For example, non-binary people’s gender identity might be made more or less linguistically possible depending on the grammatical structure of a language. Here, we examine the lived experiences of non-binary Italians in a gendered language, asking: (1) What are the experiences of nonbinary speakers of a binary gendered language with gender identity (non-)affirmation? (2) What is the impact of these experiences on their well-being?

Below we review how the presence of grammatical gender (or the lack thereof) impacts language users, first in a broad sense and later with a focus on non-binary people whose identities are not well-represented within binary gendered languages.

### **Consequences of grammatical gender in languages**

As discussed previously, the way language conveys gender may not only influence our mental representations but also our treatment of other people as well (Gabriel et al., 2018). One example of this is the “masculine generic,” a common grammatical rule in which the masculine form is used to refer to people perceived as men, those whose gender is unknown or irrelevant, or to mixed-gender groups (Gabriel et al., 2018). Interestingly, this rule can shape our mental representations of people (Hord, 2016). Although the use of the masculine generic form is intended to be understood as gender neutral and encompassing all people regardless of their sex or gender identity, its use might nonetheless lead to a male-centered interpretation bias. For instance, in a series of studies, Gygax et al. (2019) pointed out that people struggle to process the generic masculine as truly generic. For example, French speakers who were introduced to a character in a text described as a sister, had more issues recognizing that this same character could be a part of a group referred to by a generic masculine form (e.g. musicians; Gygax et al., 2012).

In a 2008 article, Gygax et al. explored how the use of the masculine generic forms affects mental representations of professions, specifically those with varying gender stereotypes. Results showed that there was a strong male bias for all professions when statements used the generic masculine form, regardless of the associated gender stereotypes. That is, in both German and French, people were more likely to assume that men were the subjects of the statements. Studies such as these demonstrate that the lack of words to describe a group of people in a gender-neutral way biases us toward a male representation of the referents, “erasing” people who do not use masculine forms to refer to themselves.

Furthermore, the strong presence of grammatical gender in gendered languages has been linked to sexism and inequality between the different genders (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). For instance, Jakiela and Ozier (2020) carried out a global study to test whether the representation of women in the workforce, women’s education, and

gender attitudes would differ between countries with predominantly gendered languages and those with more gender-neutral languages. They found that countries with gendered languages were associated with a significant 12% reduction in women's participation in the workforce.

Although they found no significant correlation with educational attainment, they reported a significant relationship between gendered languages and more support for traditional gender roles. To eliminate the confounding effects of cultural differences, the researchers replicated these findings within African countries speaking both gendered and non-gendered languages. These additional findings demonstrated the robustness of the relationship between gendered languages and gender attitudes in the workforce. These results suggest that gendered languages may influence not only how we talk about different genders, but also how we perceive them and treat them in broader social contexts.

Together, these studies point to language as a medium for perpetuating strong gender norms and roles, which further participates in dictating social expectations of what is seen as normal and usual (Motschenbacher, 2014). This, in turn, may lead to disadvantaging, (and to an extreme extent, even possibly harming) groups of people not occupying the dominant or common space in the discourse (e.g. DeFranza et al., 2020; Gygax et al., 2008; Jakiela & Ozier, 2020). Furthermore, by only allowing the existence of two genders, binary gendered languages contribute to creating a hierarchy between men and women where women might often be seen as inferior to men (Coady, 2018). As such, they effectively enforce the view of gender as binary and dichotomous—where certain gender identities are erased by being linguistically non-existent (Coady, 2018; Hord, 2016). This latter point is also evident by the lack of research on binary gendered languages and identities not falling into the traditional binary gender system.

Seeing as languages can affect what we perceive as normal, desirable, and possible (Motschenbacher, 2014, 2019), the fact that non-binary genders are made nearly impossible in the context of binary gendered languages means that such languages do not offer non-binary

people suitable grammatical structures for authentic self-expression. Furthermore, they are often stigmatized and excluded from discourse for not adhering to mainstream cisnormative ideas of gender (Motschenbacher, 2019).

### ***Non-binary gender identity and its impact on mental health***

Non-binary genders fall under the wide spectrum of transgender identities (Tompkins, 2014), meaning that non-binary people do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth based on their biological sex (Johnson et al., 2020). They may identify as residing between the masculine or feminine, as both, or neither (Johnson et al., 2020), reflecting the fluidity of gender identity (Whitley et al., 2022).

Consequently, it can be nearly impossible for non-binary people to express their gender identity authentically in languages that do not offer gender-neutral or otherwise inclusive linguistic forms (Baros, 2022; Coady, 2018). This lack of linguistic possibilities effectively hinders non-binary people's everyday discourse: from not being able to choose an appropriately gendered verb form, to being forced to use incorrect pronouns, of facing difficulties in getting addressed correctly. These challenges can lead to frequent instances of non-affirmation and, in some cases, social avoidance.

Such barriers further contribute to the heightened stress experienced by non-binary individuals (Galvez, 2022; Spiegelman, 2022), who already tend to experience worse mental health than cisgender and transgender binary people (James et al., 2016; Veale et al., 2017). While the unique mental health issues associated with specifically non-binary people are heavily understudied (Darwin, 2017; Scandurra et al., 2019), studies suggest that many potential stressors are linked to daily discrimination, prejudice, stigma, micro-aggressions, and violence experienced due to their minority status (Badgett et al., 2007; Testa et al., 2012).

Minority stress theory explains how sexual and gender minorities' mental health is affected by affective, behavioral, and cognitive reactions to proximal and distal stressors (Meyer, 2003; Testa

et al., 2015). While this theory has been widely applied, it has also been critiqued for focusing too heavily on deficits rather than resilience (Frost & Meyer, 2023), not paying sufficient attention to the systemic stressors (Riggs & Treharne, 2017), or not addressing the intersectionality of identities (Tan et al., 2020). For a more comprehensive review of critiques and applications, see Tan et al. (2020) and Frost and Meyer (2023).

Proximal stressors are internal, subjective, and dependent on the person (Parr & Howe, 2019; Scandurra et al., 2017, 2019), such as internalized transphobia or stigma (i.e. negative self-beliefs about one's identity; Testa et al., 2015), concealment of identity, and expectations of rejection (Rood et al., 2016, 2017). Distal stressors, on the other hand, are objective and external, and include prejudice, discrimination, and misgendering (Matsuno et al., 2024; McLemore, 2018). An additional stressor that is specific to non-binary people is *non-affirmation* (Testa et al., 2015), which refers to events where one's identity is not recognized, verified, understood, or affirmed (Chang & Chung, 2015; Parr & Howe, 2019; Testa et al., 2015). This stressor may be experienced in various contexts, such as in healthcare (Taylor, 2022), at universities (Whitley et al., 2022), schools, families, and even LGBTQ+ spaces (Johnson et al., 2020; Matsuno et al., 2024; Scandurra et al., 2019).

Non-affirmation can often take the form of misgendering, which includes the use of incorrect pronouns, names, or otherwise gendered language not aligning with the gender identity of the referent, such as calling a man "Miss" (Matsuno et al., 2024; McLemore, 2018). Unlike their transgender binary peers, genderqueer people are more likely to experience frequent misgendering, which is negatively associated with felt authenticity and leads to greater dissatisfaction with one's appearance (McLemore, 2015) as well as higher levels of depression (e.g. sadness, hopelessness, withdrawal from activities, and suicidal ideation or attempts in the past year), greater stress, and more transgender stigma (McLemore, 2018; Parr & Howe, 2019). Nonetheless, those with more social support experience significantly less distress.

While misgendering is not unique to non-binary people, they are likely to experience it more frequently than transgender binary people, seeing as societies, cultures, and languages are built around the idea of binary gender categories, resulting in even less recognition and understanding of their gender identity (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Crucially, it has been shown that those encountering frequent misgendering suffer from severe mental health issues that can be similar as those that experience larger, albeit less frequent forms of aggression such as employment discrimination and violence (Baros, 2019; Galupo et al., 2014; Parr & Howe, 2019; Sue et al., 2007). Furthermore, the frequent misgendering of non-binary people is not only emotionally taxing (Matsuno et al., 2024; Parr & Howe, 2019), but may also result in additional stress from just existing within spaces carrying explicit gender markers, such as bathrooms (Darwin, 2017; Matsuno et al., 2024; Rood et al., 2016). While these spaces are typically considered to be physical, here we argue that binary gendered languages may also constitute "spaces" that innately create inescapable situations where the gender binary is highly salient and present—increasing non-binary people's distress.

### **Non-binary gender identity and language**

Language is one of the main ways through which one's gender identity can be affirmed, explored, denied, or constructed (Baros, 2019, 2022; Butler, 1990; Spiegelman, 2022; Zimman, 2017). Crucially, because there is a substantial lack of research that explores the issue of linguistic and social recognition of non-binary identity in countries with binary gendered languages, this research aims to investigate the effects of a binary gendered language on non-binary people's experiences with affirmation.

Some research indeed suggests that binary gendered languages offer limited opportunities for self-expression and identity affirmation. In a survey of 182 transgender, including non-binary, participants from English, Swedish-English, German-English, and French-English language backgrounds, German and French bilinguals unanimously agreed that these languages lacked affirming linguistic possibilities. In contrast, they

perceived English as more transgender-friendly (Hord, 2016). Furthermore, some participants highlighted that they misgendered themselves to be understood.

While the study primarily focused on data from English monolinguals, the accounts of French and German bilinguals point toward the challenge of achieving identity affirmation in gendered languages for those identifying outside of binary gender categories. Moreover, non-binary students of binary gendered languages (i.e. Spanish and French) report frustration over the lack of gender-neutral pronouns and that they often experienced (self-)misgendering (Baros, 2019, 2022; Spiegelman, 2022). An intentional misgendering by the teacher, after a student tried to change their pronouns in the class, led to the student dropping their French language course (Spiegelman, 2022).

Even though binary gendered languages can cause non-binary people immense distress through the ever-present misgendering caused by the lack of gender-neutral terms, other alternatives exist. One study found that many participants felt affirmed in their identities through respect and acknowledgement of their identity, for example, by being asked about their pronouns or by using chosen names (Bircher, 2016), which can be done in binary gendered languages as well to a certain extent. This support may come from family, friends, the LGBTQ+ community, and a wider social network (Bircher, 2016; Smith et al. 2022). Thus, while non-binary people speaking a binary gendered language may lack the ability to fully express their gender identities in their native language and might experience difficulties with others affirming them, there still exist ways through which they may feel recognized. We return to this crucial point in the discussion.

### **Current study**

Although non-binary people face challenges with gender-neutral terms even in relatively more inclusive and gender-neutral languages such as English (Hord, 2016), these challenges are likely even more pronounced in binary gendered languages, where avoiding gendered expressions in everyday conversation is far more difficult.

However, little is known about the experiences of non-binary native speakers of binary gendered languages with affirmation of their gender identity in their native languages in daily interactions.

In the current study, we explore gender affirmation in the context of the Italian language, which has not received much attention (Scandurra et al., 2017). In Italian, all nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs are marked either for feminine or masculine grammatical gender. For example, adjectives are inflected with “-a” to mark feminine (e.g. “contenta”) and “-o” to mark masculine gender (e.g. “contento”). Although there have been attempts to include more gender-neutral forms in Italian (e.g. by replacing the feminine and masculine markers with a more gender-neutral schwa “-ə;” Scotto di Carlo, 2020), such initiatives have received mixed reactions and barely led to any changes in the frequency of the use of a more gender-neutral language (Scotto di Carlo, 2020).

As a language cannot be fully separated from culture, it is important to mention that Italy is not very accepting of transgender people, and there are no laws that protect this community against hate crimes (Trappolin, 2021). Furthermore, there is a continuous lack of recognition of non-binary identities within the legal, medical, and societal spheres, and in order to access medical care, some sort of pathology, namely gender dysphoria, must be proven (Fazio et al., 2024). Additionally, due to regional disparities, access to specialized centers is limited and inconsistent (Costa, 2023). While very recently the requirements for legal gender recognition have changed and now transgender people do not need a judicial authorization for a gender affirming surgery (Figuerora, 2024), more challenges for the transgender community in Italy remain. The classic discourse in Italy regarding gender centers around cisnormative ideas of complementary genders—feminine and masculine (Trappolin, 2021), which is further reproduced and reinforced by the Italian binary gendered language (Coady, 2018).

Given that this study has compared a more gender-neutral English with gender-binary Italian, it is relevant to consider the broader context of queer inclusivity in the UK. While the UK still faces considerable challenges, it offers relatively

more institutional support for transgender individuals via trans-inclusive care reforms and a more centralized access to gender identity clinics (Witney et al., 2025). Additionally, many of the UK universities have trans inclusion policies, offer gender neutral bathrooms, and support the students' name and pronoun changes (Smith et al., 2022). However, recent legal developments have introduced new uncertainties. In a recent decision, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the definition of "woman" in the Equality Act 2010 is based on biological sex rather than gender identity or the possession of gender recognition certificates, raising concerns about the future direction of transgender rights (Hatton, 2025).

Since studying non-binary people's experience with non-affirmation in their native language is a relatively new and understudied area of research, we decided to use a qualitative approach that would contribute to our participants' voices being heard, and would allow them to share their unique lived experiences and perceptions of the Italian language. This way, we hope to capture the diversity of participants' narratives (Wagaman, 2016) and explore these research questions:

1. What are the experiences of non-binary native speakers of the Italian language with gender identity (non-)affirmation?
2. What is the impact of these experiences on their well-being?

## Methods

### Participants and recruitment

For this study, 13 Italian non-binary adults (age range: 20–38,  $M=26.07$ ,  $SD=6.59$ ) were recruited (see Table 1). The number of participants to be recruited was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2013) sample size recommendations, and limited by the availability of participants that fit our inclusion criteria. In order to ensure emotional proximity to the binary gendered language (Dylman & Bjärtå, 2019), all participants were native Italian speakers, and were also fluent in English. The majority of the participants lived in Italy, with two being students at Glasgow universities. The main modes of advertisement were participation recruitment Teams channels and Sona systems of the University

of Glasgow, Discord, Twitter, and local LGBTQ+ organizations. Specifically, five LGBTQ+ organizations in Italy and in the UK confirmed their interest in advertising the research on their platforms. The UK organizations and universities were considered for recruitment due to convenience sampling and the belief that the participants would be L2 speakers of English as well. Additional participants were found via the snowballing method. Neither the organizations nor the participants were remunerated for advertising or taking part in this study.

Participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms and other identifying information was anonymized. To increase their sense of agency, participants were given the opportunity to select their pseudonyms (Vincent, 2018). Five participants took this opportunity.

The study was ethically approved by the School of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Glasgow (ID: 2161). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants' consent was checked throughout the study, and they were reminded of the option to withdraw at any point. At the end

**Table 1.** Demographic information.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender identity	Preferred pronouns	Residing in
Alex	28	Trans non-binary, intergender	They/them (English); he/him, lu/- (Italian)	Italy
Ali	21	Genderqueer, non-binary	Any pronouns (English) – preference for they/them; she/her (Italian)	UK
Beatrice	20	Xenogender trans woman	She/it	Italy
Briar	22	Gender apathetic, agender	Any pronouns	Italy
Kai	38	Non-binary	She/he	Italy
Mick	26	Non-binary	He/him	Italy
Mush	30	Non-binary, queer	Any pronouns	Italy
Nox	21	Non-binary	Any pronouns (English); she/her (Italian)	Italy
Ree	21	Non-binary	They/she (English), he/she (Italian)	UK
Robin	21	Non-binary	Any pronouns; preference for she/her (Italian)	Italy
Rowan	21	Non-binary male	They/them (English); he/him (Italian)	Italy
Sol	38	Non-binary woman	She/her	Italy
Vesper	32	Non-binary	Any pronouns	Italy

of the study, they were given a list of mental health resources both in the UK and in Italy.

### Procedure

We collected data via online semi-structured interviews conducted fully in English via Microsoft Teams (Version 16.2.8). The decision to run the interviews in English was made due to the Italian language limitations on the side of the Interviewer/Researcher. Nevertheless, a native Italian speaker was available for informal consultations. The choice for semi-structured interviews was made to ensure a dialogical approach, allowing for flexibility and delving deeper into issues important to individual participants (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Participants were encouraged to ask questions if they wondered about anything about the study, including the researcher interviewing them. Upon asking, they were offered further information regarding the study, motivations for the research, and academic and personal background information of the researcher. This step was crucial to build rapport and demonstrate transparency (Hord, 2016).

Before their interview, participants received an email with the consent form, the information sheet (see Appendices A and B), and the interview questions (see [Appendix C](#) for the full interview protocol). To ensure the discussion topics were not distressing or invasive, the interview questions had been previously checked by a member of the transgender non-binary community. Participants offered their feedback as well. To increase their comfort, participants were allowed to keep their cameras off (Baros, 2019) and two participants took this opportunity. The interviews were concluded with debriefing the participants (see [Appendix D](#)). Interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams and ranged from 33 min to 2 h and 12 min.

### Reflection

Throughout this project, we carried implicit and explicit expectations of what we could find in the data. These expectations were partially informed by our experiences of being native speakers of binary gendered languages and the realization that non-binary identities were severely limited within such languages. This strongly influenced our initial view of the impossibility of gender

identity expression and affirmation in the context of a binary gendered language. To counter this, we tried to avoid focusing solely on negative statements and also look for positive ones. We acknowledge that the interpretations of the data might have been implicitly shaped by our cultures of origin and our gender identities. While the main researcher identifies outside of the strict gender binary, we checked our understanding with the participants by sharing the preliminary results with them. Their feedback was used to ensure the analysis was truthful and of high quality (Birt et al., 2016; Gary & Holmes, 2020).

### Data analysis approach

The recorded interviews were uploaded to Transkriptor (Version 1.0.9) for verbatim transcription, after which the transcripts were downloaded to a password-protected device and deleted from Transkriptor. The transcripts were manually checked for mistakes and uploaded to NVivo (Version 12; QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) to be analyzed.

Due to its ability to center participants' narratives and its flexibility to analyze the data experientially (Byrne, 2022), the method of analysis was an inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thus, it was possible to engage in a data-driven theme discovery and capture the lived experiences of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Assuming a relatively uncomplicated relationship between the language used and the reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Taylor, 2018), and perceiving the participants' accounts as a collection of subjective interpretations offering a view at an underlying true reality (Fletcher, 2017), the critical realist theoretical framework further guided the data analysis.

### Analytical guidelines

The analysis of the data was carried out through using NVivo for the ease of organization of the lengthy dataset. As stated above, the transcripts were uploaded into the program, which made the process significantly more efficient. Transcripts were labeled and stored in clearly defined folders, and each was coded systematically line-by-line. Analysis of the interviews via reflexive thematic analysis was led by the guidelines set by Braun and Clarke (2006). For

ease of description, the guidelines will be described in stages, however, the actual process was non-linear and iterative, such as that some codes were removed as a part of a theme and formed a new one during the Stage Four, or the quote selection was altered throughout the write-up stage.

Stage 1: The transcripts were read and re-read for familiarization, and initial thoughts and ideas relating to the research question were attached as annotations to participants' quotes.

Stage 2: The transcripts were read again to create inductive codes relating to the research question, focusing on experiences, causes, and consequences of the binary gendered language and gender identity (non-)affirmation.

Stage 3: The selected quotes were reviewed to ensure they belonged to their respective codes and matched the description. Subsequently, the codes were collated into potential themes or elevated into themes if they were considered as rich and broad enough. This step was done via visualizing the possible themes through arranging the codes and their descriptions in Excel to explore how they fit together. At this point, the relationships between the themes were also considered and visualized via a figure.

Stage 4: Three themes and three subthemes were kept based on their relevance to the research question and their prevalence in the data. Underdeveloped themes that seemed to be too narrow or unfocused were discarded, or became a part of larger themes.

Stage 5: After defining the themes, they were given names: *Structures of Erasure*: *Unspoken Selves*, *Gender binary prison*, and *Institutional binary gender fixation*; *The Labor of Affirmation*; and *Affirmative Networks*. After this stage, the analysis was written up. A few participant quotes underwent a linguistic revision at this stage. None of the content was changed, however, the quotes were edited to achieve higher clarity and readability.

## Analysis

Overall, three interconnected themes and two subthemes were identified. First, the overarching theme of *Structures of Erasure*, captured within subthemes: *Unspoken Selves*, *Gender binary prison*,

and *Institutional binary gender fixation*, and the theme of *The Labor of Affirmation* describes mechanisms behind feelings of non-affirmation in the language, which seem to be the consequences of the *Structures of Erasure*. The *Affirmative Networks* theme, however, identifies supportive networks as a protective factor against binarism in the language and the society as described in the *Structures of Erasure* theme. As Figure 1 illustrates, all themes feed into explanations of affirming and non-affirming experiences of non-binary people in Italian.

### Structures of erasure

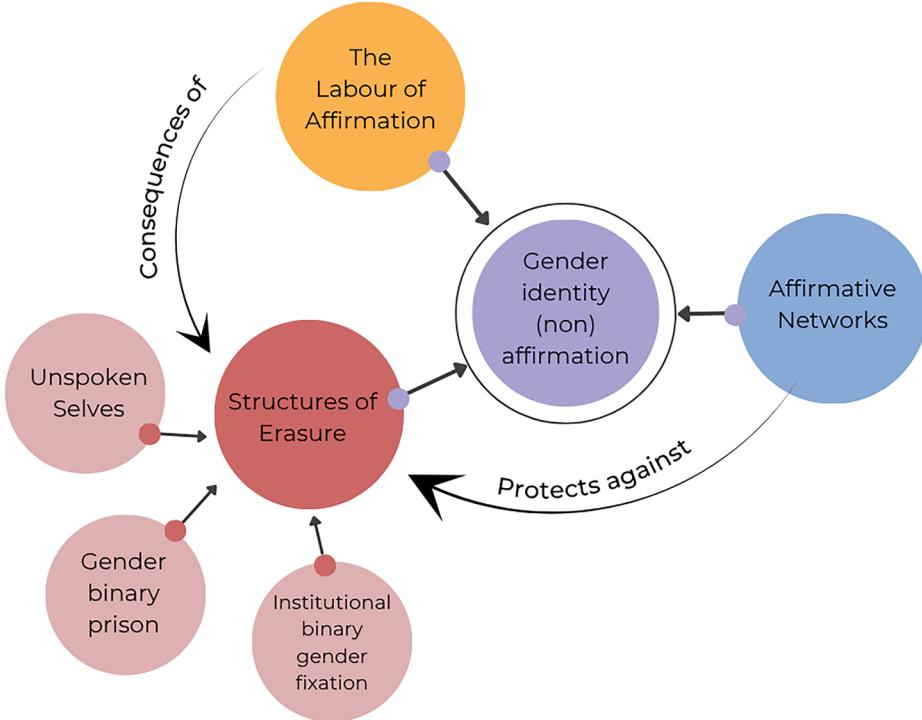
This overarching theme captures both the societal and linguistic mechanisms and the consequences of the mechanisms for the participants. The participants expressed their negative feelings regarding how language and society create obstacles that ultimately limit their access to experiences that could be affirmative. This theme is divided into three subthemes. First, the *Unspoken Selves* details the participants' experiences of Italian as insufficient through the absence of proper terminology and grammatical structures which would afford them affirmation. Second, *Gender binary prison* specifies that the binary grammatical structures that do exist leave them with very limited options. Third, *Institutional binary gender fixation* shows how society reinforces this binary gender division through institutional gender assumptions.

### Unspoken selves

Throughout the interviews, the participants stressed how language limits their ability to express themselves properly through the lack of available words and grammatical structures. This led to excessive difficulties with self-affirmation of their gender identity, which evoked negative feelings in many participants:

As I said, it's it's pretty difficult with the language as well, it cannot really give you the means of really expressing how you feel, I guess. So yeah, it is a little bit sad. (Nox, lines 159–161)

It's just very frustrating. Um. Because there is no way in my own language, my like own home to refer to



**Figure 1.** Thematic map. An illustration of the outcome of our theme analysis, demonstrating the emerging themes and relations between themes.

myself and represent myself. And it is for really no reason at all. (...) There's like constructs that are in place that have no reason to keep existing, and I- like to me it is really weird that people are so attached to them. (Ali, lines 294-297)

The perception of other people being attached to outdated binary constructs seems to baffle Ali, as these same constructs are the culprits behind their challenges in self-representation and gaining recognition and verification. The seeming “pointlessness” of established constructs which no longer truthfully represent the current social world appears to exacerbate Ali's frustration. This was especially evident in Ali's statement about how they cannot speak of themselves in an affirming way in their “own home,” a place which should normally afford them expressive freedom.

For some participants, this lack of gender-neutral structures resulted in feelings of invisibility:

I feel kind of transparent. (...) in society, because, of course, if such words don't exist, if there are no terms that I can use for myself, uh it means that in a way I don't really exist. (...) I am visible when I say that I'm a man. (Rowan, lines 359-370).

In Rowan's views, language has the power to determine what is allowed to exist even beyond

the linguistic realm, and the only way one can exist is if their identity is linguistically possible and adheres to the rules of a cis-normative society. Such a closely knit relationship between language and existence suggests that to obtain visibility Rowan is “forced” to assume a binary gender identity, which does not capture the true essence of their being. Such language limitations may further influence whether someone can explore and articulate their gender identity to themselves:

It's not necessarily not being able to express it to others because you know, again, my identity is something that I feel is sort of personal, so I don't really go around talking about it to everyone, but it's more the lack of words to express it for myself that really bothers me. (Beatrice, lines 248-251)

Gender identity is a personal and integral part of the participants' self-concepts. Beatrice highlights the importance of this part of her identity for herself by pointing out the difficulties with fully conveying her identity to herself. While she does not deny the distress resulting from the inability to self-affirm in front of others, she finds it more disturbing to not be able to verbalize to herself the part of her that she knows so

intimately well. Upon closer inspection, Beatrice's description elicits an analogy between words and a mirror: even without a mirror you know who you are, but only with a mirror you may be able to explore and understand certain parts of yourself better or construe a more authentic representation of yourself.

Furthermore, as suggested by Ali, coming back to a place that constricts one's gender identity may highlight the ever-present language limitations, especially when returning from a more affirming place:

[Affirmation] is something that I only have when I'm here [the UK] and I don't have when I'm in Italy, and it's one of the reasons why um, my mental health gets a lot worse when I'm in Italy. It's like a complete lack of expression or recognition of any of this. And it's all day, every day. It is always. (Ali, lines 353–356)

Ali discusses the realized disparity in gender identity affirming experiences between Italy, their home, and the UK. The lack of affirming experiences in their home country as opposed to abroad adversely affects Ali's well-being. The described constancy of non-recognition and inescapability of the language constraints, with no perceived possibility for gender expression, complicates receiving affirmation. This flaw is realized both in the language and within the society, which jointly orchestrate challenging situations for non-binary people, including the process of coming out:

I just straight up have not used the Italian language to talk about this. I just use the English language, which is also why I've not talked to many people about this, because it's easier to people who understand English, and to people who already have an affinity to these kinds of arguments. (Briar, lines 329–332)

The lack of grammatical structures and terminology in Italian makes it harder for the participants to convey to other people what their gender identity is. Consequently, some participants rely on code-switching to English to access the terminology they need to come out to people in their lives. Italian is framed as an insufficient language in comparison to English which makes it easier for other people to understand the idea behind non-binary gender identities. Nonetheless, this

approach reduces the pool of people who could understand and affirm their identity, as they would need to be proficient in English, or be knowledgeable about non-binary genders.

### ***Gender binary prison***

Nearly all participants indicated a lack of cultural and linguistic flexibility, restricting their access to situations in which their identities could be recognized and affirmed. This lack of flexibility is often expressed by participants' perceptions of the Italian language as being heavily gendered and only offering binary choices for self-expression. This forced choice not only stands behind the issue of not receiving recognition for their identity, but it also complicates the authentic performance of their gender identity. At this point, non-binary people find themselves at a crossroad, afforded only an illusion of free choice:

When every day you have to pick your prison, I don't know how to put it, um you basically keep reinforcing the walls all day long. (Mush, lines 666–668)

It's always about talking about what compromise you're up to make, what will be less hurtful for you. Often having that kind of conversation, like literally: "Would you prefer feminine or masculine?" Because there is no other way and um, unfortunately, I still struggle with this. (Mush, lines 899–902)

Mush describes how being a non-binary person in Italy is about an everyday choice, about picking a prison that will be the least harmful to them. The inevitability of this choice is something Mush struggles with as it continues to invalidate non-binary identities and creates a non-authentic image that is reinforced through daily interactions. Though, despite the necessity to choose, it could be suggested that non-binary people carry an additional burden from having to pick a side and misrepresenting their identity. Other participants, such as Robin, spoke of this prison as something that is being done to them:

Oppressive [language] like, I don't know, it's like trying to put someone in a cage. But it's also infuriating and frustrating not simply because of how I personally feel about the situation or myself, but also how I feel about the way we have built society (...) I feel powerless when I think too much about how uh inescapable the cage of a man and woman feels. (Robin, lines 368–377)

Robin perceives the binary language as oppressive and harmful to non-binary people, feeling angry but incapable of changing the language and the societal perceptions of gender. The utterances “trying to put someone in a cage” and “inescapable cage” evoke an image of a person who, despite their best attempts, is being forcefully imprisoned.

A notion similar to oppression was brought up by Rowan, who struggles with “living” on one side of the binary for too long:

Well, mostly when the male forms build up... at some point it becomes suffocating. (...) And I end up searching for labels for non-binary identities, so maybe I can remind myself: “Maybe I’m this, maybe I’m that,” and sort of pull myself out of the binary. (Rowan, lines 586–589)

This experience, described by suffocation, seems to capture the physicality of the impact of gender non-affirming situations, as if the masculine language they use for themselves carries a weight that is attempting to ground them in the binary. The discomfort with the masculine grammar and the implied non-affirmation appear to lead to feelings of confusion and self-doubt, which they fight by “reminding” themselves who they are by relating to non-binary identities on the internet.

### ***Institutional binary gender fixation***

This subtheme captures the idea of being perceived and assumed to be one of two genders in the eyes of a society that only recognizes the binary. For instance, the participants perceived that institutions contribute to perpetuating the idea of gender binarism by explicitly assuming people’s genders or not accepting the idea of non-binarity. Even places that should be accepting of identity fluidity, such as gender identity clinics, still adhere to the binary conceptualization of gender identities. Thus, some participants feel hopeless and see that there is no place where they would, in the wider society, feel affirmed:

They don’t make you feel valid in Italy. (...) There is no way to see this positively. For example, whenever we go to a centre for gender affirmation, there is a psychologist inside who says: “OK you’re a man, so you’re transgender” (...) It happens that if you are a non-binary person, you don’t exist within this binary, you know, you’re outside. (Mick, lines 480–488)

Additionally, as is shown in the following quote by Mush, the use of visible cues, institutional norms, and procedural cues by their clinician, contribute to defaulting to binary gender assumptions, or going as far as insisting on gendering someone who clearly self-defined as living fluidly and outside of the binary:

[The doctor said]: “I notice that you use “uh” [schwa], but I would use the feminine looking at you,” because I was wearing a face mask and I was doing going to do very, let’s say, feminine [physical] exams. And basically I was telling the doctor that it’s fine, I use all pronouns, that’s why I didn’t specify, but actually the doctor insisted that: “yeah, but I will call you this way because I would assume your gender.” And I was there thinking: “yeah, maybe you shouldn’t, that that’s quite easy.” (Mush, lines 136–142)

This tension between fluid identity expression and institutional gender assumptions creates a sense of alienation and power imbalance, where a clinician perpetuates misrecognition, and reinforces the binary logic through a refusal to acknowledge and honor someone’s identity in its fullness.

Finally, the whole idea of categories seemed uncomfortable and like a trap to participants, as no matter whether binary or non-binary, a category comes with a limiting definition: *“If there was no categorization, then... uh, I’m- I would be free to be who I am and no one would try to- to describe me, you know.”* (Sol, lines 382–383). Sol suggests that this liberation from the gender binary prison would grant her the ultimate authority over her identity, which would then exist outside of the normative or stereotypical expectations for her gender expression.

### ***The Labor of affirmation***

As already mentioned, participants see Italian as severely lacking an affirming, gender-neutral language. To avoid misgendering themselves or other people, the participants feel they must rely on effortful and complicated language structures:

There are, of course, words that don’t change whether the context is masculine or feminine, but it is extremely- it’s just like I have to actively think to make my sentences more convoluted to try and

follow gender-neutral words. It's just- it's not worth it.  
(Ree, lines 159–161)

Ree references the lack of naturalness and the excessive effort behind gender-neutral Italian. This statement strikes as describing an unwanted mental exercise, which inadvertently leads to being a deterrent to people engaging with affirming language. This is an idea that Kai (lines 953–953) echoes: *“It feels forced and people don’t like to force themselves when they speak.”* Ree further identifies that their negative views and frustration regarding this linguistic form stream from the cognitive demands of having to “actively think” about “convoluted” sentences. This suggests that the effort put into this gender-neutral language does not result in a great enough affirmation that would balance out the cognitive costs. This view repeats throughout the interviews where the participants suggested that people just end up picking one side of the binary:

It's not part of the language, but at least we can mix the vowels- it sort of sounds like “uh.” It's very hard to use it and remember to use it. It requires a lot of practice. So yeah, it's very limited. I think I've never met a non-binary person using any of those, just picking male or female. (Rowan, lines 272–275)

Here, Rowan echoes Ree's views on gender-neutral language as requiring extra effort and practice. Therefore, it is suggested that unlike the language widely available to people identifying within the binary, non-binary people are not afforded the automaticity of an affirming language. It appears that this reference to the schwa as the mixed vowels which are “not part of the language” captures an additional strain, which is being avoided by assuming binary language to refer to oneself. Nonetheless, the use of the phrase “at least” suggests that even though the language is not as straightforward, there still exist some ways people can be gender-neutral. The “only” setback is the excessive mental labor behind affirmation.

As seen in the subtheme *Unspoken Selves*, the language impedes coming out to people, and in this case, the difficulty of using gender-neutral language also complicates requesting a more affirming language:

It's one of the reasons why I don't come out in any language. It feels like I'm giving a task to someone else to do so much work, and in Italian, that is worse. So I don't know how I would explain it to someone who isn't already familiar with it. (Ali, lines 264–266)

While this evidenced extra effort to use gender-neutral language, is not a unique issue to the Italian language, the lack of grammatical structures in place that could support gender-affirming language creates additional obstacles for non-binary people. Possibly, because they see it as an onerous “task,” Ali appears to be having difficulties imagining that someone would be willing to go to the lengths of learning to speak gender-neutrally to them and understand their identity. Perceiving such troubles leads them to be considerate of other people in their lives, even at the cost of their comfort and validation.

### **Affirmative networks**

This theme discusses the importance of safe spaces which let participants feel accepted, validated, and anchored within their identities. These safe spaces, as shown through the quotes, are made out of social bonds with people who make the effort to create an affirming environment. For example, Nox talks about their partner's and friends' acceptance of their identity:

He [their partner] said: “I would still support you. (...) I would still like to support you and be your friend and like, uh, help you out in that in that regard.” And my other friends also said: “yeah (...) you are you like, we don't care. You have to feel comfortable with yourself. It's still you, your same experiences. Your brain is yours still, it's not like you're becoming a different person. It would be the same for us.” (Nox, lines 570–577)

Nox describes how their friends see them for who they are and accept them as such, because for them Nox remains the same. The use of “you” in Nox' references to their conversations with their friends suggests that their friends validate them through centering the discourse and decision-making around Nox' comfort. It is apparent that the friends are creating a safe space for Nox to be in touch with their gender through not “caring” about anything else but Nox. Such

validation is not only present in friend-groups, but also within families. This support oftentimes presents as a protective, affirming bubble:

I don't really care how people in general view me. I think if the people are the ones that I care for – like my friends, my family – if those people can just [affirm] me, then I'm fine with that. The rest of the world can do whatever. (Ree, lines 437–440)

Ree and other participants only require their close ones to know, recognize, and affirm them as non-binary, while framing the rest of the world as irrelevant. This highlights the importance of a close, supportive network as capable of fulfilling the need for affirmation. Despite the distress caused by general non-affirmation, their close ones, by being affirming, create a safe and healing space for the participants: “*I have ways to alleviate that [non-affirmation], such as staying with friends that actually do validate me, those are, I mean for me, the pillars.*” (Alex, lines 628–631).

The idea of friends being the pillars carried through a couple of the interviews, and some participants, such as Rowan, brought up a specific way their friends help them to alleviate the overwhelming feelings of invalidation: “*I would even go on the phone and talk to a friend so I can say some “right” words, or ask them to call my name because sometimes I feel lost.*” (Rowan, lines 610–611). Rowan finds solace in their closest friends, who give them the space to present themselves authentically, and who help them find themselves again through calling them by their chosen name. This emphasizes the importance of verbal validation as the effects of dead-naming and misgendering can lead to self-doubt and feeling “lost.”

Aside from friends and family, the participants also spoke about the ways the community helps them feel affirmed:

We founded uh, [transgender] feminist collective inside the university. (...) Every time there's someone new coming, there's a round where everyone says their name and pronouns, and so it's really a safe space. Not only for me, but for other people too. And I feel that's mostly what makes me feel safe, comfortable, and visible. (Vesper, lines 461–465)

The presence of like-minded people creates unique opportunities for some participants to feel secure, authentic, and visible through the implied

rejection of cisnormative assumptions via asking for pronouns. Vesper's words suggest that the positive feelings are mostly elicited by the freedom and agency the community offers to its members by giving them control over how they are represented and addressed. This, as evidenced in previous sections, is not always possible in the wider society, yet appears to be normalized within the LGBTQ+ supportive community. The normality of it all can be demonstrated by the evolution of introductions from commonly stating just names, to stating both names and pronouns. Alex also argued that being in spaces allowing such self-definition, is not only validating but also transformative for the impact of the binary gendered language, which was previously portrayed as oppressive and non-affirming: “*Uh, those are the best times. Uh for uh, I mean when using language when using Italian is not as frustrating.*” (Alex, lines 784–785).

Overall, the participants stressed the importance of the support network:

It is very very painful if there is not a support network that will help you express yourself, or a place where you can actually talk about stuff or try things, it's just draining, so you just accept things in a way. Otherwise, it just becomes even more painful. (Mush, lines 670–675)

Mush acknowledges the feelings of helplessness and pain that non-binary people without such networks face. For many, this inability to experience affirmation and authentic living may result in resignation by “just accept[ing] things.” Although this mindset may not protect them from the hurt, the other option of not resigning is “draining” and “more painful.”

## Discussion

While binary gendered languages have been shown to influence gender attitudes and promote sexism (Jakiela & Ozier, 2020), they have also been implicated in the erasure of identities (Coady, 2018). The current paper aimed to explore the experiences of (non-)affirmation and their impact on non-binary speakers of the Italian language.

We explored the latter problem by focusing on non-binary people's experiences with gender identity affirmation in the context of the Italian

gendered language. The participants' accounts emphasized language's role in performativity and the construction of gender (Butler, 1990; Jones, 2016), and stressed the severe lack of terminology and grammatical structures that would allow for easy and affirming representation of gender identities. Moreover, participants also discussed the negative impact of these barriers on their emotional well-being. Nevertheless, despite the linguistic and societal barriers, participants identified supportive networks as a protective factor that afforded them feelings of affirmation. We summarize and discuss our findings below.

### **Structures of erasure**

This overarching theme, encompassing *Unspoken Selves*, *Gender binary prison*, and *Institutional binary gender fixation*, illuminates the constraints by a binary societal and linguistic framework. Within this context, language does not afford performative expressions and representative terminology to individuals identifying outside of the male-female binary. Participants identified several barriers to gender identity affirmation within the language, the most salient of which was the absence of appropriate terminology and grammatical structures. This linguistic limitation hindered their ability to comfortably describe and express their identities within the binary gendered language. These findings align with previous studies, where the inability to articulate participants' gender in binary gendered languages led to feelings of distress, exasperation, and diminished sense of affirmation (Baros, 2019, 2022; Crouch, 2017; Hord, 2016).

For some participants, the linguistic limitation in Italian posed a significant barrier to the identity disclosure (i.e. coming out), impacting them negatively through decreased affirming experiences. Though the literature presents mixed results, the most prevalent findings are that increased identity disclosure is associated with improved mental well-being and reduced symptoms of depression (Riggle et al., 2017). In response to these linguistic barriers, some participants actively turned to English as a gender-neutral language alternative, finding it easier to come out, and experience well-being benefits in the

form of increased affirmation and expressive freedom. However, because this strategy relies on the English language proficiency of their communication partner, it was not always effective for coming out.

Nonetheless, the reduced opportunities for recognition and affirmation brought about by the feminine-masculine dichotomy in Italian grammar and society (Coady, 2018; Trappolin, 2021), might contribute to non-binary people's more frequent experiences of non-affirmation (McLemore, 2015, 2018; Testa et al., 2015). These struggles were evident in the subthemes *Gender binary prison* and *Institutional binary gender fixation*, where the "prison" was constructed through the existence of only two gendered grammatical forms and society's binary gender division. While most participants reported comfort with any pronouns, many also expressed that the lack of affirmation of their full identities elicited profound emotional responses. Feelings of suffocation, imprisonment, invisibility, powerlessness, helplessness, and anger were frequently mentioned, resonating with emotional responses associated with experiences of microaggressions (Matsuno et al., 2024; McLemore, 2018; Rood et al., 2016).

Furthermore, some participants suggested that being stuck in the binary without opportunities to gender themselves accordingly, made them question their identity. Past research also found that identity non-recognition was associated with feelings of confusion and self-doubt (Johnson et al., 2020). Importantly, since participants in this study were native speakers of a binary gendered language, their experiences might have differed qualitatively from those of non-native speakers (e.g. Baros, 2019). For example, misgendering might lead to more intense reactions in one's native language due to heightened emotional reactivity (Dylman & Bjärtå, 2019), and future work can investigate whether non-affirmation is indeed more impactful in a native compared to non-native contexts. A limitation of this study is also that the participants were interviewed in their non-native language. This may have affected the described depth of their experiences based on the same "emotional reactivity" principle described above and should be investigated in future studies.

The lack of terminology and binary division of the language and society made some participants feel visible only if they adhered to binary ideas of gender. Previously, such feelings of invisibility in language were suggested by studies arguing that language has the power to erase groups from discourses and our minds (Coady, 2018; Gygax et al., 2008, 2019; Wilchins, 2004). For example, using masculine generic to describe a mixed gender group, led to people not realizing that women could be a part of the group (Gygax et al., 2008, 2019). Hence, for identities that are rendered linguistically marginalized and difficult to be represented, societal and linguistic invisibility appears unavoidable (Baros, 2019, 2022; Coady, 2018).

Overall, language creates a space where binary gender division is made salient, which contributes to the experiences of distress and decreased emotional well-being for individuals through non-affirmation (Rood et al., 2016; Testa et al., 2015). This study further supports the minority stress theory, which posits that minority stressors, both external and internal, negatively impact the mental health of gender minority groups (Meyer, 2003, 2015). As evidenced in participants' narratives, all categories of stressors outlined by the theory were present. Proximal stressors manifested through identity concealment (i.e. not coming out or assuming a binary identity); distal stressors included deliberate misgendering by medical professionals; and non-affirmation was reported as rooted in the structural limitations of the language itself. Participants described feeling lost, powerless, and frustrated, often explicitly linking the stresses with deteriorating mental health.

Importantly, these findings expand and enhance our understanding of non-affirmation as not just an act done by other people, but also as an individual inability to express one's gender in a way that is congruent with their inner self-concept. In this sense, this hindered performativity of gender identity in a binary gendered language (Jones, 2016), may thus inflict additional stress on non-binary people.

However, the transferability of the findings may be limited by the context-specific nature of this sample, consisting exclusively of non-binary Italians who could speak English. Notably, most

participants were prompted to compare Italian with English in terms of gender-affirming linguistic possibilities, particularly if they independently raised the issue of linguistic differences. This could have inadvertently primed them to think about the disparity in affirming language possibilities, possibly leading them to portray Italian more negatively. Hence, future work can specifically examine the experiences of monolingual non-binary speakers of binary gendered languages. Nevertheless, while participants referenced the use of English as a tool for expressing their non-binary identities, no theme was generated due to the lack of sufficient consistency or depth.

### ***The labor of affirmation***

Literature has suggested that adopting gender-neutral language is an effortful process (Airton, 2018; Sanford & Filik, 2007). Oftentimes, it may be especially challenging due to the structure of the language or the limited knowledge of gender-neutral language structures (Baros, 2019; Crouch, 2017; Spiegelman, 2022). In this study, participants also perceived gender-neutral language as excessively complicated and laborious.

Within this theme, participants described two methods of achieving gender neutrality. First, they avoided gendered language by selecting words with a gender-neutral meaning and structuring a sentence in a way that would eliminate gendered references. For example, instead of saying "I was happy," which would require a gendered adjective in relation to themselves, they said "It was a happy situation." Second, they referenced the use of schwa (-ə), a relatively recently introduced gender-neutral vowel alternative to the typical -a (feminine) and -o (masculine) suffixes in Italian (Scotto di Carlo, 2020).

Nonetheless, both methods were seen as demanding considerable mental effort and constant linguistic self-monitoring. This perception led some to conclude that gender-neutrality was not worth the effort. These reactions may be explained by the idea of cognitive demand avoidance, which suggests that people generally avoid mentally challenging tasks, unless the anticipated rewards justify the effort (Sayalı & Badre, 2019; Westbrook et al., 2013). As such, some

participants may have perceived the effort behind the gender-neutral language as outweighing the affirming experiences, as according to Testa et al. (2015) even “fighting” for affirmation can be felt as non-affirming.

Furthermore, since the schwa is a sound not widely used in Italian (Scotto di Carlo, 2020), the lack of experience with the pronunciation may deter some from using it. These perceived difficulties with gender-neutral Italian also translated to some participants’ hesitancy in asking others to use affirming language, fearing they would be imposing cognitive burdens. Nonetheless, as seen in the following section, certain people did exert the required effort to validate the participants through using affirming language.

### **Affirmative networks**

Despite the numerous barriers to affirmation discussed within this study, participants also discussed how their supportive social networks created a safe space for them to feel affirmed, despite the lack of accommodation for non-binary gender identities in Italian. Friends, family, and community members affirmed participants by engaging in simple yet meaningful acts: asking which pronouns they use, consistently using these pronouns and their chosen names, and recognizing and accepting their identities. These forms of affirmation have also been reported by the wider transgender population (Bircher, 2016), emphasizing the importance of pronoun and name usage, as well as broader recognition and acceptance of identity, as the fundamental forms of affirmation.

Notably, the simple act of inquiring about the pronouns a person wants to be addressed with grants them the agency and authorship over their identity (Zimman, 2017), an empowering act that is possible despite the limiting Italian language. This form of agency challenges cisgender norms, which contribute to the assumptions that everybody is either a man or a woman (Coady, 2018; Motschenbacher, 2014). Furthermore, research has shown that a sense of control strongly predicts higher life satisfaction in the general population (Hojman & Miranda, 2018). Though that study did not measure the effects of agency related to gender identity expression, we predict

that if someone has control over how they are addressed, their well-being will be positively affected. This prediction is supported by our participants’ framing of safe spaces as contexts - either places or interpersonal - affording them control over their identities. This, in turn, contributed to feelings of comfort, safety, and validation. These findings emphasize the importance of these practices and support Bircher’s (2016) recommendations, namely, that we should listen to how non-binary people want to be addressed. This is especially crucial in affirmation-limiting binary gendered languages.

Additionally, numerous studies have found that social support from significant others and community is very important to transgender including non-binary people (Galupo et al., 2019; McLemore, 2015; Trujillo et al., 2017; Weinhardt et al., 2019). Transgender people have reported that supportive relationships are important factors protecting their well-being (McConnell et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2022) from minority stressors (Testa et al., 2015; Weinhardt et al., 2019). The participants’ accounts also suggest that living in a supportive environment created by their families and friends helped them alleviate the distress of daily non-affirmation and even made them perceive Italian as less hurtful.

### **Wider societal implications**

The findings of the current study emphasize the call for gender-neutral and affirming language in Italian (Galvez, 2022). Specifically, there is a need for less foreign and more natural gender-neutral language forms (Airton, 2018; Levy, 2019). Though there have been efforts to develop gender-neutral grammatical forms which could be used, such as the schwa, the general argument is that the pronunciation and use are not intuitive enough (Scotto di Carlo, 2020). Moreover, the lack of support from the Italian society for transgender issues (Trappolin, 2021) contributes to the limited impact of the LGBTQ+ community and linguists attempting to make Italian more inclusive. Hence, further efforts must also address the stigma and prejudice directed at transgender people to gain more support for language change (Sendén et al., 2015).

Since language and global attitude change is slow, creating more affirming spaces may also be possible via a more bottom-up approach. This study recommends these three methods for the increase of affirming situations:

1. Collaboration between linguists and LGBTQ+ communities on the dissemination of comprehensible guides on gender-neutral Italian use. This should include the opening of spaces where people can safely practice the language, which could lead to making the use of gender-neutral language more effortless and automatic (Haith & Krakauer, 2018; Sanford & Filik, 2007). Additionally, education institutions could potentially include inclusive language practices in their curriculum, or support the opening of student societies whose aim would be to create spaces where such language could be unofficially taught.
2. Encouraging non-binary people to join LGBTQ+ societies and organizations to increase their access to supportive and accepting spaces (Weinhardt et al., 2019).
3. Giving non-binary people control over their self-definition, addressing them according to their wishes, and accepting and recognizing their gender identity (Zimman, 2017). Institutions like universities and employers could provide recognition of self-identification through pronoun and name changes in their systems as well.

## Conclusion

This research added to the growing literature on issues of non-binary people. More specifically, the focus of this research were the experiences of non-binary Italians with gender identity affirmation in the context of the Italian language. The findings support past research, suggesting that affirmation within binary gendered languages is difficult to achieve. This study demonstrated that affirmation is obstructed through inadequate and insufficient terminology and gender-neutral language. It was also found that non-affirmation stemming from the inability to be (self-)affirmed affects their well-being and evokes a range of

negative emotional responses, such as feelings of imprisonment, powerlessness, and frustration. In discussing options for affirming language, the participants stressed the complicated nature of gender-neutral Italian and how affirmation through this route is currently difficult. Nevertheless, the effects of inadequate language were ameliorated in safe and supportive spaces which accepted and recognized the participants' identities and offered them authority over the language used to represent them. Thus, this study emphasized that the lack of appropriate language affects non-binary people's identity representation, affirmation, and well-being, but also that safe networks made existing within a binary gendered language easier. Seeing as language is greatly important for identity representation, there is a grave need for more research and identification of ways through which non-binary people could be supported and affirmed.

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## Appendix A

### Consent form

Title of Project: Experiences of non-binary speakers of the Italian language with gender identity affirmation

Name of Researcher (s): Lucia Feketová

*If you agree to participate in this study then please read the following statements and sign your name below to indicate your consent.*

- *I have read the Information Form for participants and so understand the procedures and have been informed about what to expect;*
- *I agree to participate in this study investigating experiences of non-binary speakers of the Italian language with gender identity affirmation and communication;*
- *I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary, and that I can withdraw from the study, at any time and for any reason, without having to give a reason to the researcher;*
- *I understand that I may omit any questions that I would prefer not to answer;*
- *I understand that my participation in this project is for the purposes of research, and is in no way an evaluation of me as an individual;*
- *I consent to being audio and/or video recorded as part of the project;*
- *I agree to the results of this study being published and accessible to the public;*
- *I understand that any information recorded in the investigation will be made and kept anonymous and will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available*
- *I understand that I can contact the researcher(s) for this project; by e-mail to receive more information and/or a summary of the anonymized group results.*
- *I understand that this consent form with my name is being collected for the sole purpose of recording that I have agreed to take part and that it will be destroyed by 17/03/2023. Recordings of my voice will be kept until 17/03/2024 and no identifying information will be archived for future research and plagiarism checking with the write-up of this project.*
- *I confirm that I agree to the way my data will be collected and processed, and that data will be stored for up to 10 years in University archiving facilities/password protected computer in accordance with relevant data protection policies and regulations.*
- *I consent to the collection of data about my age, gender identity, pronouns, the language I speak, country of residence, and personal experiences with gender identity affirmation*
- *I consent to the University processing my personal data for the purposes of the research detailed above and within the Participant Information Sheet*

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

## Appendix B

### Information sheet

#### 1. Study title and Researcher(s) Details

My name is Lucia Feketová (she/her/they), and I am a fourth-year undergraduate student of Psychology at the University of Glasgow, looking at the experiences of non-binary speakers of the Italian language with affirmation and communication of their gender identity.

#### 2. Invitation to participate

You are being invited to take part in a research study. It is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully to ensure whether you wish to participate or not.

#### 3. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to investigate your experiences with living in the context of a gendered language, that is, Italian. A gendered language is a language in which nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and other parts of speech are classified for gender (usually masculine or feminine). I would like to hear about how being a native Italian speaker or a bilingual Italian speaker affects you and your perception of being valid or affirmed in your gender identity, and how you affirm your identity through the language available to you. Through this, you may also express your views and feelings regarding your language. I will be interviewing you online through Microsoft Teams on these topics, using a set of questions provided to you in a separate document, however, new questions may come up during our interview. You are also free to mention and discuss other topics related to this if you so wish or believe it is relevant to your experiences. The interview might last somewhere between half an hour and an hour.

#### 4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you indicated an interest in this study and because you are an adult non-binary speaker of the Italian language. You may be able to share your unique experiences in relation to your identity and the Italian language.

#### 5. Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the process at any point for any reason, even during the interview. I understand that this topic may cause some distress, so your health, well-being, and comfort are my highest priority. If you decide that what you disclosed to me during our interview was more than you feel comfortable with, you may request for your data to be withdrawn. Nonetheless, I hope you will be willing to share your experiences with us and will help better our understanding of your daily life experiences.

#### 6. Will my data be kept confidential?

Your participation in this study is confidential and your personal and identifiable information will not be disclosed

to anyone. It may not be possible to ensure full anonymity due to the individual experiences which you may report, however, to maintain your confidentiality, you will be given a pseudonym in the interview transcript, and names of places, organizations, or people you mention will be changed as well. Your data will be stored on secure servers of the University of Glasgow, and a password-protected device.

#### 7. What specific information about myself do I have to provide?

Beyond sharing your experiences, you will be asked about your gender identity, your age, the languages you speak, and your current country of residence.

#### 8. What will happen to the results of the research study?

After our interview, your data will be combined with those of other research participants. The data will be analyzed together with other participants to identify patterns in your shared experiences. Neither your data nor the results will be used for other purposes besides research.

#### 9. Who can I contact if I want more information?

If you wish to find out more about this study either prior to or after our interview, or if you wish to review the interpretation of your data or the anonymized results, feel free to contact Lucia Feketová via this email: [2483524F@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2483524F@student.gla.ac.uk). You may also contact the supervisor of this study Dr Limor Raviv via this email address: [Limor.Raviv@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Limor.Raviv@glasgow.ac.uk).

#### Privacy Notice for:

Experiences of non-binary speakers of the Italian language with gender identity affirmation and communication

The **University of Glasgow** will be what's known as the "*Data Controller*" of your personal data processed in relation to this research study titled "*Experiences of non-binary speakers of the Italian language with gender identity affirmation and communication*." This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

#### Why we need it

We are collecting your basic personal data such as the age and gender for the purposes of basic research and to describe you based on broad categories, but not to identify you in any way. We will only collect the minimum amount of data required for these purposes to minimize all risk to you of being identified.

#### Legal basis for processing your data

In the context of research, the lawful basis upon which we will process your personal data is usually where "Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller" (Article 6 of UK GDPR). We will also process personal data as permitted by Article 9, of the UK GDPR which permits processing necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical re-

search purposes or statistical purposes which shall be proportionate to the aim pursued, respect the essence of the right to data protection and provide for suitable and specific measures to safeguard the fundamental rights and the interests of the data subject. Where we need to rely on a different legal condition, such as consent, we will inform you of this in the Participant Information provided to you.

### What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit within this project is processed by staff at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom. Data will not be sent outside the UK for any purposes at any time. Throughout the project and during the archiving period all data will be stored on password protected University servers.

### How long do we keep it for

Your anonymized data will be retained by the University for archiving purposes for a period of 10 years. After this time, data will be securely deleted.

### What are your rights?\*

Under the UK GDPR you have the following rights:

- to obtain access to, and copies of, the personal data that we hold about you;
- to require that we cease processing your personal data if the processing is causing you damage or distress;
- to require us to correct the personal data we hold about you if it is incorrect;
- to require us to erase your personal data;
- to require us to restrict our data processing activities;
- to receive from us the personal data we hold about you which you have provided to us, in a reasonable format specified by you, including for the purpose of you transmitting that personal data to another data controller;
- to object, on grounds relating to your particular situation, to any of our particular processing activities where you feel this has a disproportionate impact on your rights.

Your rights to access, change (rectify), or remove your information (erasure) may be limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we may not always be able to remove the information that we have already obtained. We must comply with a request to erase personal data, or to rectify personal data that is inaccurate unless there are grounds for refusing the request specified in the UK GDPR. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personally-identifiable information possible.

The Participant Information Sheet given to you will detail up to what point in the study data can be withdrawn as it may be anonymized after a certain point and thus no longer distinguishable as yours.

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request *via* the webform or contact [dp@glad.ac.uk](mailto:dp@glad.ac.uk).

\*Please note that the ability to exercise these rights will vary and depend on the legal basis on which the processing is being carried out.

### Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at [dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

## Appendix C

### Interview protocol

#### Research question

“What are the experiences of non-binary speakers of the Italian language with gender identity affirmation?”

Hello, my name is Lucia Feketová and I am an undergraduate psychology student at University of Glasgow. First, I want to thank you for giving me your time and agreeing to participate in this interview. I would like to learn about your experiences with gender identity affirmation and communication in the Italian language. There are no right or wrong answers, or desirable or undesirable ones and no one will judge you here. I would like you to feel comfortable expressing your true thoughts and feelings. In order to protect your privacy, I will ask that we use general terms when speaking about others, however, do not worry if something slips out. All data will be anonymized and kept safely on secure servers of the University of Glasgow. This conversation will not be shared with anyone and if I use any of your quotes in my analysis, I will maintain your anonymity.

If it is alright with you, I will be recording this interview so I do not have to take notes. This is just so I can give you my full and undivided attention. [Start recording]

Have you had the chance to read through the interview questions and the consent form prior to this? Do you have any questions about this study, this interview, or any part of the consent form before we start?

Are you ready to start with the interview?

### Interview questions

Introduction:

- What language(s) do you speak?
- How frequently do you use Italian?
- How do you define your gender identity?
- What are your pronouns?

- Do they differ between the different languages you speak? Why?
- How familiar are you with possible gender-neutral terms in Italian?
  - Do you use them? Why/why not?
- Who have you told about your gender identity?
  - Do they use your pronouns?

Main questions:

- How do you view your language in terms of its possibilities for your gender expression?
  - Is this different from other languages you speak?
- What are your experiences with communicating your gender identity in your language?
  - How do you validate/affirm your gender identity?
- What kinds of opportunities does your language offer to validate your identity? Are there any?
  - How does that make you feel?
  - Are there any differences compared to other languages you speak?
- In what cases do you experience non-affirmation due to your language?

(Check consent again)

- What are your experiences with misgendering?
  - How often does it happen?
  - How do you react?
- What are your experiences with self-misgendering?
  - How does it happen?
  - How does it make you feel?
- Have you ever felt discomfort related to your gender identity?
  - What kind of situations made you feel discomfort in your language due to your gender identity?
- When or what situations make you feel the most comfortable and verified regarding your gender identity in your language? Are there any?

That is all I prepared to ask you. Do you have anything you would like to add that I have not asked about? Or do you have any questions for me?

Thank you very much for participating and for sharing your experiences with me. I will be changing my participants' names and giving them pseudonyms to protect their, and your, identity. Is there a specific pseudonym you would like me to use or would you prefer it if I chose a random one?

to hear about how being a native speaker of the Italian language affects you and your perception of being valid or affirmed in your gender identity, and how you communicate your identity using the language available to you. Furthermore, I wanted to know your views and feelings regarding your language.

### ***Further information about the topic if you are interested***

Language is a powerful tool that influences us and our ways of thinking and seeing the world. Gendered languages, such as Italian, further affect us by enforcing strong binary through its classification of nouns and pronouns into feminine and masculine genders, which further influence other parts of the speech. This sort of dichotomy or separation into two gender categories may contribute to erasing identities which do not fall into the binary, such as non-binary identities. Such linguistic invisibility may make it more difficult to be affirmed in non-binary people's gender identities and might cause further distress.

Here is an interesting short blog about this topic, featuring other people's experiences as well: What happens if you're genderqueer - but your native language is gendered?

Also, here is a BBC article about a topic closely related to this research: The subtle ways language shapes us.

### ***Can you tell me my results?***

Unfortunately, I cannot share your results with you. However, I can share with you the finished analysis of all participants' data. Furthermore, if you wish, I could share with you a preliminary analysis of the data for you to check whether your experiences have been interpreted and presented appropriately.

In case of questions or concerns regarding the study or the results, please, do not hesitate to contact me *via* my e-mail address: [2483524F@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2483524F@student.gla.ac.uk), or my supervisor Dr Limor Raviv *via* her e-mail address: [Limor.Raviv@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Limor.Raviv@glasgow.ac.uk).

### ***Support services:***

#### ***The Samaritans (UK):***

The Samaritans offer a listening service, where you can talk to anyone about anything.

You can contact them by:

- Telephone number: 116 123
- email address: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
- you can call and contact them at any time (24h a day Monday–Sunday).

#### ***Breathing Space Scotland (UK):***

Breathing Space is a free, confidential, phone and webchat service for anyone in Scotland over the age of 16. You can contact them, where they will listen and offer information and advice.

- Telephone number: 0800 83 85 87

## **Appendix D**

### ***Debrief form***

#### ***Debriefing information***

Thank you very much for your participation!

### ***What is the purpose of this study?***

The purpose of this study is to investigate your experiences with living in the context of a gendered language. I wanted

Opening hours:

- Weekdays: Monday–Thursday between 6pm and 2am
- Weekend: Friday–Monday between 6pm and 6am

**LGBT Health & Wellbeing Scotland (UK):**

This is a helpline for LGBTQ+ people in Scotland to contact in need of support.

You can contact them by:

- Telephone number: 0300 123 2523
- E-mail address: [helpline@lgbthealth.org.uk](mailto:helpline@lgbthealth.org.uk)
- Website: <https://www.lgbthealth.org.uk/>

Opening hours:

- Tuesday and Wednesday between 12pm and 9pm
- Thursday and Sunday between 1pm and 6pm

**MindLine Trans+ (UK):**

A confidential emotional, mental health support helpline for people identifying as transgender, agender, genderfluid, non-binary ...

You can contact them by:

- Telephone number: 0300 330 5468
- Website: <https://bristolmind.org.uk/help-and-support/mindline-transplus/>

Opening hours:

- Currently on Friday between 8pm and 11pm

**Libellula (Italy):**

Libellula is an association, providing information, legal, psychological support and a dedicated helpline to transgender people.

You can contact them by:

- Telephone number: 3318380140
- Website: <https://www.libellulaitalia.com/servizi.html>

Opening hours for friendly listening helpline:

- Monday: 10am–12pm, 3pm–5pm
- Tuesday: 5pm–8pm
- Wednesday: 4pm–6.30pm

**Telefono Amico Italia (Italy):**

Telefono Amico Italia gives anyone the opportunity to talk about their struggles anonymously and confidentially, allowing each individual to recover their history and meaning within society.

You can contact them by:

- Telephone number: **02 2327 2327**
- You can contact them any day from 10 am to midnight

Thank you again for your time and contribution.