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Call me by my name! Constructing and acknowledging non-binary identities

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Abstract

Despite the growing visibility of gender-expansive identities, the construction of non-binary ones remains comparatively underexplored in social psychology. In particular, the dialogical dimension of identity work remains mostly unaddressed. Thus, this study investigates how non-binary individuals construct their identities in dialogue with present and imagined others. We conducted a discourse-oriented thematic analysis of accounts of 19 non-binary participants across 7 focus groups in Milan (Italy), identifying four interrelated themes. In the first – *living within the binaries* – non-binary participants described the ongoing struggle of living in a binary society where gender is reified through everyday interactions, institutional practices, and language. In the second – *de-anchoring from the binaries* – participants distanced themselves from cis-normative and trans-normative models, rejecting both the gender assigned at birth and the equation between bodily expression and gender identity. In the third – *living in-between* – non-binary identities are framed as a creative and empowering space of becoming, where gender identity is made processual and multiplied – thus promoting an alternative to binary representations of gender. In the fourth – *call me by my name* – participants reported facing a representational void and actively creating new meaning-making resources – gender-inclusive language, gender-neutral pronouns, and novel symbols – to make their identities visible and recognisable to others. Our findings show how non-binary identity is constructed not individually but relationally, making recognition an existential condition. Ultimately, we call on social psychology to attend to the dialogical and recognition-based dimensions of identity work for gender-expansive individuals.

Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of individuals have defined their gender beyond the male-female binary (Chew et al., 2020), particularly among younger generations (Herman et al., 2022). Non-binary identities include, but are not limited to, identities that (i) fall between or beyond received categories (e.g., bigender, polygender, third gender); (ii) fluctuate between categories (e.g., genderfluid); or (iii) refuse gender altogether (e.g., agender, gender neutral, etc.) (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). As with other gender-expansive identities, non-binary people challenge the imperative that gender should correspond to one's biological sex (Bower-Brown et al., 2023), that it exists in binary form as either man or woman (Bradford & Syed, 2019), and that gender identity remains stable and unchangeable over time (Speechley et al., 2024). Moreover, non-binary people do not conform to trans-normative models (Johnson, 2016) that assume transition from the starting point of one well-defined gender to the clear endpoint of another (Merlini & Aboim, 2025), necessarily implying a medical transition (Speechley et al., 2024). Consequently, non-binary people may be perceived as "not trans enough" or feel that their experiences lack legitimacy (Garrison, 2018).

Hence, non-binary identities challenge hegemonic representations of gender and transition paths, impacting the construction and expression of gender identity for those undergoing transition, and – in turn – affecting how others – who witness these transitions from the outside – recognise and validate these identities. While trans-binary transitions have received growing attention in social psychology, non-binary transitions remain comparatively underexplored, with a smaller body of literature exploring how these individuals construct their own identities (Morgenroth & Means, 2025).

Despite its relevance, this small body of research neglects the broader dialogical dimension of identity work, particularly how others' perspectives shape non-binary transition paths. This work faces unique challenges in contexts where language itself limits gender expression. For instance, Italian's grammatical gender system – like other Romance languages – marks nearly all words as masculine or feminine through morphosyntactic features requiring agreement across sentence elements. Unlike English, Italian offers no gender-neutral pronouns or nouns, constraining both how non-binary individuals express their identity and how others can recognise it.

The current study aims to develop a sociopsychological understanding of non-binary identity work, thus examining how non-binary identities are constructed in dialogue with present or imagined others, potentially acknowledging or contesting these emerging identities. To do so, we draw on a broader project on gender-inclusive language in Italy, which comprised eleven

focus groups with 57 participants of differing gender identities; from these, we select and analyse the seven focus groups that included non-binary participants (n = 19) to focus on their accounts and identity work.

A sociopsychological understanding of non-binary experiences

Despite increasing visibility and recognition, non-binary individuals still face significant stigma, discrimination, and community-level transphobia that contribute to poor mental health outcomes (Hammack et al., 2024; Truszczynski et al., 2022; Worthen, 2021). Together with invisibility and invalidation, these add to a unique minority stress (Rosati et al., 2025), with non-binary individuals experiencing misgendering almost on a daily basis (Corby et al., 2025; Jacobsen et al., 2024). Moreover, concerning identity, non-binary individuals struggle to define, label, and express their gender – often lacking the language and symbolic resources needed to represent their identity (Levitt et al., 2024). In turn, they struggle to have their identities recognised in relational and institutional contexts (Rosati et al., 2025). At the relational level, non-binary identities often lack acknowledgment, with individuals reporting experiences of invalidation, overemphasis, and avoidance more often than those who identify as trans-binary (Goldberg et al., 2019). At the institutional level, most legal systems deny recognition of the third gender option in official documents and spaces (e.g., gender-neutral toilets) (Benato et al., 2024; Newman & Peel, 2022).

The recognition struggle is further heightened in contexts with gender-marked languages, namely, ones that lack gender-neutral options (Sendén et al., 2026). For instance, in Italian, there are no gender-neutral pronouns, and first names are – with few exceptions – inherently gendered (such as masculine names like *Mario*, which end in -o, and feminine names like *Maria*, which end in -a). Additionally, most role nouns are gendered (e.g., *psicologa* for a female psychologist versus *psicologo* for a male psychologist), and all nouns require gendered articles (Baiocco et al., 2023; Formato, 2019). Therefore, in Italian, the referent's gender is made visible in every communicative exchange, forcing non-binary individuals into binary linguistic categories that constantly expose them to a double struggle: to define and express their identity, and the risk of being misgendered and made invisible by others (Rosati et al., 2025). Moreover, this binary marking is acquired early in language acquisition, making it pervasive and taken for granted since early childhood (Mornati et al., 2023).

This linguistic constraint exemplifies how the absence of shared cultural resources shapes the possibilities for identity construction and recognition. For instance, non-binary individuals undergo a complex process when choosing a name, often experimenting with several before settling on one and developing strategies to work around the gendered structure of Italian – such as adopting foreign (typically English) names, inventing their own, or using two names – as ways of breaking free from the binary the language imposes (Anzani et al., 2023). In addition to that, recent proposals for gender-inclusive language aim to neutralise gender in role nouns and pronouns; such as replacing the gendered ending of a word with an asterisk (*) or a schwa (ə) as a neutral suffix, in both written and spoken language (Abbondanza et al., 2025; Baiocco et al., 2023). However, although these forms may reduce gender dysphoria and promote positive feelings toward one's non-binary identity (i.e., gender euphoria) their adoption remains contested and debated both in the Italian discourse (Anzani et al., 2023; Scotto di Carlo, 2020). Ultimately, this absence of shared cultural resources – such as language – arises in a broader context where gender diverse people have low legal protection, non-binary identities have no formal legal recognition, and non-binary people remain mostly invisible in the media landscape (Bracco et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on non-binary experiences, three main gaps limit our understanding of identity construction (see Morgenroth & Means, 2025). First, research has predominantly employed quantitative methods, neglecting the analysis of non-binary people's lived experiences. Second, when addressing identity, research has focused primarily on individual experiences rather than on how identities are constructed in *self-other relations* and through language. Third, gender transitions have been predominantly studied as a linear process – moving from one stable identity to another – thus overlooking the open-ended nature of non-binary transitions (Merlini & Aboim, 2025). In sum, while we know that non-binary individuals face recognition struggles in contexts where binary categories and a grammatically gendered language dominate, we lack a thorough understanding of how non-binary people construct their identities in dialogue with present and imagined others, and of the role these others play in acknowledging or contesting them.

Theoretical framework: A dialogical approach to liminal identities

To address these gaps, we integrate the dialogical approach to social representations theory (Marková, 2023) and the theory of liminality (Greco & Stenner, 2017). The former allows us to analyse how non-binary identities are constructed in *self-other relations*, while the latter informs us on how individuals deal with open-ended transitions.

Social representations are systems of meanings – *beliefs*, *norms, values*, and *practices* – that are shared by social groups to understand relevant social objects, including identity (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Sammut et al., 2015). For instance, gender identity is mostly conceptualised as binary in which one identifies and – in turn – is identified as either a boy/man or girl/woman; making it one of the earliest and most pervasive categorisations (Wagner et al., 1999; Weißflog & Grigoryan, 2024). Moreover, this representation comes with specific *norms* and *practices* for each gender – thereby influencing many aspects of life (Ferrari & Mancini, 2020). Representations are "social" insofar as they are always embedded in *self-other* relations; individuals make sense of the world and themselves in dialogue with present or imagined others (Marková, 2023). Representations of gender are, for example, scaffolded through socialisation, as children learn to read and reproduce meanings, norms, and practices traditionally associated with gender through interaction with peers, parents, and institutional contexts (Zadeh & Cabra, 2020). From early childhood, others position individuals within gendered categories, teaching them which objects, practices, and spaces are considered appropriate for boys and which for girls (Duveen, 1993; Psaltis & Duveen, 2006). Identity – thus – emerges through constantly positioning oneself in relation to others' representations, with individuals potentially accepting, negotiating, or resisting how others position them (Howarth, 2002).

However, not all representations are equally valued. Moscovici (1988) distinguished representations based on the degree of contestation they encounter in the public sphere. *Hegemonic representations* – being coercive, prescriptive, uniform, stable, and mainly unchallenged (Gillespie, 2008) – are consensually shared by most members of a society or culture and reified in institutions and practices (Batel & Castro, 2018). Gender identity provides a clear example of this, as – unlike other identities – it is an imperative: everyone must have a gender identity, and this identity must be a binary one (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Lloyd & Duveen, 1990). In contrast, *polemical representations*, being defended by a minority within the public sphere, propose an alternative that contests hegemonic ones (Castro & Batel, 2008), as in the case of gender-expansive identities, defining and expressing gender outside conventional models (Bower-Brown et al., 2023).

Two main sociopsychological processes are central to the construction of shared meaning-making resources (i.e., representations): *anchoring* and *objectification* (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). *Anchoring* consists of making sense of new phenomena – such as emerging identities – by drawing on already-familiar, shared meaning categories. In the case of non-binary identities, this could be achieved by reducing the complexity of this emergent identity to already known binary categories (Barbee & Schrock, 2019); a process directly at work in everyday experiences of misgendering, where others make sense of non-binary people by forcing them into binary gender categories (Levitt et al., 2024). *Objectification* makes the abstract concrete and tangible by linking abstract ideas to images, symbols, and practices. For instance, gender identity can be objectified by being linked to bodily markers, such as biological sex, and to everyday material practices, such as clothing and toys, which make gender appear concrete, visible, and recognisable (Lloyd & Duveen, 1990).

However, these processes are mainly functional in reproducing order, making the new fit previous understandings. But individuals can reconstruct, revisit, and challenge previous representations when confronted by others or seeking change, thus allowing for the emergence of novelty (Howarth, 2006; Zulato et al., 2025). This process of re-presentation can occur through *de-anchoring*, namely, uprooting social objects from specific social categories (Andreouli et al., 2019; Zulato et al., 2023). In the case of non-binary people, this is exemplified by their attempts to "ungender" themselves, making gender detached from traditional binary categories (Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Speechley et al., 2024). De-objectifying, on the other hand, consists of making the concrete abstract (Billig, 1988; Verkuyten, 1995; Zulato et al., 2025); such as refusing to let physical characteristics or gendered practices symbolise one's gender identity (Levitt et al., 2024).

While social representations theory explains how meaning-making is realised from different social positions and within different *self-other* relationships, liminality theory offers a temporal perspective, informing how transitions are understood

and managed. Precisely, liminality refers to the *in-between* phase of transition in which someone is "no longer" and "not yet" (Stenner, 2021). First, liminality often involves what Greco and Stenner (2017) call an ontological paradox: the subject in transition appears to fit categories that are normally treated as mutually exclusive. Non-binary identities exemplify this paradox, as their identities cannot be fully reduced by traditional gender (e.g., man and woman) and may instead be lived and understood as both/neither, and/nor simultaneously. Second, paradoxes often result in a *paralysis* of understanding and practice (Motzkau & Clinch, 2017), as previous representations are not capable of explaining the complexity of emerging identities, and new representations are not yet in place (Andreouli et al., 2019). For instance, living in a binary world, non-binary people struggle to make sense of and express their own identities and – in turn – others struggle to address them adequately (Rosati et al., 2025).

Then, according to Turner (1978), while in-between, individuals undergoing transitions (i.e., *liminars*) have no defined or recognised social or institutional position, becoming structurally invisible. And, this structural invisibility maps directly onto the lived experiences of non-binary people, who frequently report the lack of both legal and social visibility (Taylor et al., 2019). In fact, although liminality is an everyday aspect of life, some transitions get stuck or prolong over time. Non-binary identities can thus be understood as a *liminal hotspot* (Greco & Stenner, 2017), an open-ended transition that extends over time rather than "concluding" into a new stable category/position. From an external perspective, non-binary people may appear "stuck" in transition because they do not arrive at a binary endpoint, a perception reflected in the widespread attitude among cisgender people that non-binary individuals should simply "pick one" gender (Worthen, 2021). However, this apparent "stuckness" does not reflect the failure to complete transition but a refusal of binary transition models themselves (Merlini & Aboim, 2025).

Finally, paradoxes raised by liminality can be managed in two ways. By *polarisation*, namely, reducing ambivalence by re-anchoring the object to already-known meaning categories, thus reducing the complexity of non-binary people to man/woman binary. Paradoxes can also be managed by *pattern shift*, that is, by creating novel representations capable of going beyond the binaries and inventing new meaning categories, norms, and practices (Greco & Stenner, 2017). In this way, non-binary discourse holds the potential to innovate existing representations of gender (Schwab & Stamper, 2024) – as in the case of re-thinking traditional practices, such as making up new names (Anzani et al., 2023).

Thus, the present research aims to examine how non-binary people – escaping hegemonic representations of gender and transitions – construct their own identities. In particular, we aim to investigate how these identities are realised in dialogue with present or imagined others and how recognition – and its absence – shapes this identity work.

Method

Design

The study adopted a qualitative, dialogical design based on focus group discussions. This design was chosen given our interest in how non-binary identities are constructed in self-other relations (Marková, 2023): focus groups allowed us to observe identity work carried out by non-binary people as it unfolded in dialogue, both with non-binary peers and with cisgender and trans-binary participants. Thus, focus groups gave us access to identity construction with peers offering meaning-making resources, and participants positioning themselves in relation to others. We analysed these data using a discourse-oriented thematic analysis (Batel & Castro, 2018).

Participants

This study is part of a wider research project on gender-inclusive language. For this, we conducted 11 focus groups (n=57 participants) and – to grasp different perspectives on gender-inclusive language – we integrated homogeneous and heterogeneous focus groups with people identifying as non-binary (n=19), binary transgender (n = 5), cisgender women (n=22), and men (n=11); (see Table 1). To understand how non-binary identities are constructed in dialogue with others, the present study focusses on 7 focus groups involving non-binary participants (i.e., FG 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 9).

Table 1. Focus groups socio-demographics

Focus Group	Number of participants	Gender identity	Age	Duration (hours, minutes)
1	5	1 TGM*; 1 TGW; 1 NB; 2 CW;	21-55 (*M* = 30.4)	2.23
2	5	3 NB; 2 CW	23-27 (*M* = 26.0)	2.55
3	4	4 NB	20-24 (*M* = 21.0)	3.25
4	6	6 CW	20-27 (*M* = 24. 7)	2.40
5	4	1 TGM; 1 TGW; 2 NB	19-24 (*M* = 21. 3)	2.45
6	5	5 CW	20-27 (*M* = 29.8)	3.00
7	5	5 NB	22-51 (*M* = 24. 7)	2.59
8	5	1 TGW; 2 NB; 2 CW	22-49 (*M* = 29. 4)	3.14
9	6	2 NB; 2CW; 2CM	21-42 (*M* = 28. 2)	3.05
10	6	3 CW; 3 CM	21-27 (*M* = 22. 7)	2.59
11	6	6 CM	20-31 (*M* = 25. 7)	3.24

Note. *TGM=Transgender Man; TGW=Transgender Woman; NB = Non-binary; CW = Cisgender Woman; CM = Cisgender Man

Procedure

Before designing our research materials, we reached out to relevant LGBTQIA+ communities (see Appendix) in the [REDACTED FOR PEER REVIEW] area to "build relationships" with the existing non-binary community (Cornish et al., 2023). This involved mapping relevant organisations, contacting gatekeepers, sharing research aims, and discussing research materials (e.g., presentation message, topic guide, etc.). Each focus group was conducted in person in dedicated rooms in our Psychology Department and was facilitated by a moderator to guide the discussion and an observer. The discussion followed a semi-structured topic guide (see supplementary materials) designed to explore participants' experiences with the Italian language to express their identity and their use of gender-inclusive language forms, currently hotly debated in Italy. Focus groups lasted on average 3 hours and 8 minutes (Min = 2 hours and 23 minutes; Max = 3 hours and 25 minutes) and were conducted between October 2023 and February 2024.

The study was approved by [REDACTED FOR PEER REVIEW]. All participants provided written informed consent and were compensated €20 for their participation. Focus group discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. All data were anonymised and are publicly available [archive DOI].

Analysis

Our analysis focused specifically on the 19 participants who identified as non-binary, as we aimed to understand how non-binary people construct their own identities. For that, we employed discourse-oriented thematic analysis, combining thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a dialogical analysis (Batel & Castro, 2018). This approach allowed us to identify both the representational content constructed around non-binary identities and the processes through which these representations emerged in *self-other relations* – both in the dialogue with non-binary peers, in homogeneous focus groups, and in dialogue with outsiders, as in the heterogeneous ones.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase procedure, we first familiarised ourselves with the data through repeated reading of transcripts. We then conducted inductive (bottom-up) coding using NVivo software, identifying segments relevant to how non-binary identities are constructed, expressed, and recognised. Codes were organised into themes reflecting

broader patterns of meaning across the dataset. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts, with codes and emerging themes subsequently discussed and refined through team meetings.

After identifying themes, we examined the dialogical processes through which themes emerge (Batel & Castro, 2018). We applied a deductive (top-down) approach to coded segments, identifying: (a) the role of temporality (e.g., references to past, present, future); (b) sociopsychological processes such as anchoring and de-anchoring/objectifying and de-objectifying from binary gender categories; and (c) self-other relations (e.g., pronoun use, imagined others, institutional actors). This processual analysis illuminated how non-binary participants constructed identity in dialogue with others and the relational functions.

Reflexivity

Our research team was composed of cisgender people and was homogeneous in terms of ethnicity (i.e., white) and nationality (i.e., Italian). The first author brings extensive experience in qualitative and participatory methods, a sustained teaching and research engagement with marginalised and vulnerable groups, and a scholarly background informed by feminist and decolonial perspectives. We are aware that our positionality as outsiders to non-binary experiences may have shaped both the research design and the analysis. To mitigate this, prior to data collection, we adopted principles of participatory research (Cornish et al., 2023), engaging with local LGBTQIA+ organisations to share research aims, discuss procedure, design materials, and build relationships of trust with the communities whose experiences we sought to understand. This process informed the design of our topic guide and helped ensure that the questions posed were meaningful and appropriate to participants' lived experiences. During analysis, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue, with codes and emerging themes discussed and challenged across multiple team meetings. We were aware of the risk of inadvertently reproducing binary or cis-normative framings in our interpretations. We acknowledge, however, that our outsider positionality is a limitation that cannot be fully resolved through these measures alone, and that non-binary researchers may have accessed dimensions of participants' accounts that remain less visible to us. To further reflect on our analysis, we presented our findings in multiple contexts – including academic conferences and community settings (i.e., data conferencing; see Braithwaite et al., 2014) – where colleagues – including ones identifying as non-binary – provided situated feedback on our analysis and described it as "affirmative" and "empowering". Additionally, the full anonymised dataset has been made publicly available, allowing readers to scrutinise and assess our interpretations independently.

Findings

Our analysis identified four themes that account for the process through which non-binary participants construct their own identity in dialogue with others. In the first theme – *living within the binaries* – participants described gender as a hegemonic representation that defines identity along with mutually exclusive binaries (either man or woman). In the second theme – *de-anchoring from the binaries* – participants described their attempts to distance themselves from both cis-normative and trans-normative models, rejecting the gender identity assigned at birth and the trans-normative narrative of transition between binary categories. In the third theme – *living in-between* – participants described their gender identity as being *neither/nor* and *both/and* simultaneously, open-ended, and rooted in their childhood. In the fourth theme – *Call me by my name!* – participants described the existential challenge of seeking recognition for an identity that lacks an established image, symbol, or linguistic form.

Here, we present a detailed analysis of the contents and processes. In the following extracts, bold highlights the central content of our analyses, whereas italics highlights its processual elements, such as temporal elements and those illustrating dialogical aspects. The quotations presented follow good practice in doing qualitative analysis (see Batel, 2020); namely, the extracts presented aim to be the most paradigmatic of interviewees' accounts. The extracts reported in this article were first translated from Italian to English by the first author and then reviewed by the authors 2 and 5 to ensure equivalence of meaning.

Theme 1 – Living within the binaries

Non-binary participants described living in a prescriptive society where gender identity (1) is defined in mutually exclusive binary categories (e.g., either man or woman), (2) appears as "natural" and remains unchallenged by most, thus (3) limiting non-binary affirmation paths and recognition by others.

First, participants described gender as organised through a rigid binary division between masculine and feminine, forcing individuals to identify and, in turn, be identified as either a boy/man or a girl/woman. They all shared the experience of living in a society where this mutually exclusive division is made visible through everyday social interactions, practices, and spaces: "it appears everywhere", as in the words of one of our participants.

Extracts 1

1. F2P4: The whole issue stems from a clear **cultural division** *we* have between the **feminine** and the **masculine** […] **it appears everywhere**, from **clothing stores**, to **toy stores**, to **stores for baby clothes**, **toilets** and then going further...even **advertisements** are **gendered**, **everything is gendered**.
2. F7P2: When *they* call me "**ma'am**", I can't understand how *they* can call *me* "**ma'am**", but it actually happens sometimes, "**madam**" or "**sir** […] But, it's very, very rigid, that is, it's **hyper-binary"**…"**madam**" or "**sir**".

Extracts 1 show how this binary identity is reproduced through different *self-other* relations, with other people (e.g., "they") addressing them in "binary" and "hyper-binary" terms (e.g., "madam" or "sir"). Being gender-marked, Italian language plays a relevant role, with participants stressing how it makes gender visible in every social interaction but also how it does not allow for gender neutral options: "In the Italian language, you always have to specify the gender, in everything, like when you address me at the supermarket, you have to specify my gender" (F3P2), "One of the big problems of the Italian language is that it is fundamentally binary" (F1P2). Finally, gender as binary is reported to be embodied in everyday social practices and physical space, such as with clothing, toys, and toilets, highlighting how different norms and practices are linked to gender identity (Lloyd & Duveen, 1990).

Moreover, being reified in everyday *self-other* relations and practices, binarism operates as a hegemonic representation (Moscovici, 1988), where gender identity appears as "natural", taken-for-granted, and – thus – unchallenged by most. For instance, most people assume gender identity based on biological sex and physical appearance, without contemplating the existence of non-binary identities. This is illustrated by non-binary participants discussing how cisgender "others" ignore the existence of non-binary identities (Extracts 2 a). However, even for non-binary people themselves, it can be difficult not to make binary gender assumptions, as – in their own words – "brains" are wired to think in binary terms; as shown by a non-binary participant explaining this to a cisgender man (Extracts 2, b)

Extracts 2

1. F3P3: You find a lot of ***ignorant people*** on these issues, because *we* personally have to delve into these more deeply, since *we* **didn't feel represented** by what was around *us*. So, *we* delved into it. But ***a lot of people*** simply **live comfortably with *their* gender identity**, with *their* heterosexuality, with what is **socially** and **canonically accepted**, and so *they* **don't ask questions.**
2. F9P5: **My brain**, through its **cognitive shortcuts**, always assumes *the other person's* gender **regardless**… and so… I'm guessing in my head. I then started focusing on never taking for granted, including **what I see in front of me**. […] but I have developed a strategy to be **neutral**… more or less with *everyone*…okay F9P4 **you seem like a male**, but who knows.

F9P4: Who knows…

F9P5: But in my head... I go "bingo", and then I wait to get to know the person.

F9P4: Also, because anyway it's a **primary categorisation** that you do **automatically**.

Extracts 2 show different implications of a hegemonic gender binary system. First, that – within this system – it is not possible not to assume someone's gender. Our participants explained this by reifying gender categorisation in biological (e.g., the brain) and psychological (e.g., automatic cognitive process) processes, making gender assumptions inevitable and natural, and something that can only be corrected retrospectively. Second, that assumptions are anchored to binary categories (e.g., "you seem like a male"). However, while the gender binary categorisation is defined as a universal problem that concerns everyone, cisgender people are considered as the "others" who are not even aware of the existence of non-binary identities. This is attributed to their gender privilege, ultimately allowing our non-binary participants to create an "us" – made of people questioning their gender identity – and "them" – made of "ignorant people" who live comfortably with their gender and sexuality.

Finally, being hegemonic, this binary division limits the cultural resources that non-binary people can use to understand and express their own gender identity. For instance, our non-binary participants often referred to experiences of mislabelling their own identity.

Extracts 3

1. F2P5: I *started* with thinking I was a **bisexual person**", I *started* from there, and so **I knew of the existence of *queer people***, but *they* had never told me, I could be one of *them*,… I knew that ***trans people*** existed but *no one* had told me that there was the possibility that **I could be one too**. So, ***when they*** told me that, I did some **exploration** and things made more sense. There was *no longer* a **set of rules** that ***they had given me***, but it *was a going back* to retrieve all the things that I had hidden to follow **those rules**...
2. F7P2: **I tried** to**…** to **understand**… they were **difficult *years*** and…*nobody* was talking about gender identity. **Trans people** were equated to **prostitutes**… so I didn't, I didn't feel like identifying with a **prostitute**…There wasn't…the "trans man" didn't exist, so I *started to go back and forth*, so, to have **feminine** moments, then, obviously I **didn't recognise myself** in it, and I *went back*… I made a **mess**,.

Extracts 3 show the processual and ongoing struggle that non-binary people experience when attempting to understand and "recognise" their own gender identity. This process is characterised by non-linear stages (e.g., "I started from there", "difficult years", "back and forth") and is marked by experiences of mislabelling (e.g., "bisexual" and "prostitute"). Moreover, these extracts also show that identity is a relational effort (Amer & Obradovic, 2022) in which others (e.g., "they") play a dual role. On the one hand, non-binary people need to turn to new identity labels (e.g., "queer") and to communities that provide such labels (e.g., "I knew of the existence of people", "the possibility that you could be one too") to make sense of their own gender identity. On the other hand, others appear as a source of prescriptive binary frameworks that constrain identity through "a set of rules they had given to me", thereby failing to provide the language or conceptual tools to realise a non-binary identity ("no one had told me", "nobody talked about gender identity").

Moreover, non-binary transitions also involve institutional "others" who provide legal, medical and material recognition. However, this recognition is here obstructed by a binary model of transition that forces non-binary people to conform to a trans-normative narrative in which transitioning means moving from one gender to another; thus reproducing a binary system in which binaries are preserved as either/or categories and in-between positions are framed as temporary phases. Then, the prescriptive nature of the binary world is further emphasised by the requirement that non-binary people conform to binary transition paths, compelling them to adjust their narratives to fit trans-normative stories to access treatment. Extracts 4 illustrate how transitions are shaped through *self-other* relationships, with others acting as gatekeepers who control access to material and symbolic resources (such as medical treatment and legal recognition) necessary for identity affirmation.

Extracts 4

(a) F2P5**:** If you don't have the possibility to **self-determine** and *someone else*, um, **gives you the rules by which you must exist**, at that point…you **don't exist**, especially when you are a non-binary person, where, from the *point of view of the **law***, your

identity is not admissible.

Researcher 1: Can you make a concrete example of... in what sense do non-binary people not exist, or binary and non-binary trans people?

F2P5: Ok, um, well now we have a law for *trans people*, whereby, **you obviously have to choose, either M or F,** when you are a non-binary person, **if you want to access** the possibility of, um, doing certain **surgeries**, or **modifying your registry records**, you necessarily **have to choose the letter** opposite to the one *they assigned you at birth*, simply to be able to access, to surgeries, in the sense that it's, *it's a court that decides*, if you can do them or not, and so you have to **convince *the court* that you are enough on the other side, enough of the other letter**, having to **renounce**, the fact of being a non-binary person, and of **not identifying with either**, **or** with the other letter, mainly.

F2P5 articulates how *others*, here in the form of institutional actors, play an existential gatekeeping role in gender affirmation paths. These institutions set the rules under which non-binary people "must exist", rules that require transitioning to a binary target gender that is fundamentally incompatible with non-binary identity. This sets out a paradox where non-binary people must renounce an institutional identity to access the very resources needed for identity affirmation (e.g., medical treatment, name change, etc.). This shows how the binary system operates not merely as limiting but as erasive.

Theme 2 – De-anchoring from the binaries

For our non-binary participants, constructing their own gender identity begins with de-anchoring from traditional gender representations. This de-anchoring process operates in two ways: (1) moving away from previously imposed identities, whether coming from a cisgender or a transgender model; (2) breaking the equation between gender identity and gender expression.

In sharing their experiences, our non-binary participants consistently described past and present attempts to de-anchor themselves from the gender identity assigned to them at birth. This de-anchoring process operated on two levels. First, affirmation paths start with rejecting cisgender normativity, namely the assumption that one's gender identity aligns with one's biological sex (Bower-Brown et al., 2023); as exemplified by F8P1 (Extract 5,b), explaining the constraint of seeing their biological sex stated on their ID document. Second, this process involves rejecting binary trans-normative models that frame transition as movement from one binary category to another (male to female, or female to male); as shown by F7P3 (Extracts 5, b) sharing their experience of shifting between different identities.

Extracts 5

1. F7P3: I think that my **difficulty in defining myself** as a **man**, **trans**, is the fact that, on the one hand, ***I lived* as a girl for the majority, the *majority of my life***, so, I mean, **going from one box to another**, I don't want to do that, and, on the other hand, I move through realities that are, um, that are politically engaged in the transfeminist struggle in which, anyway there are *maaaany people* who are **deconstructed regarding gender** […] So, I came to the conclusion that, I don't **really care that much about defining myself in such a, binary** way as, **as a man**, or...
2. F8P1: I would absolutely **burn it** [ID document], I would write on it, **I'd rather be called Ms.** … **to emphasise the contrast.** Very often, *we*… **non-binary people**... it is a shared experience. shared *with other non-binary people.* It's not that we identify *ourselves* with something, that is... but we push it to an extreme the fact that **we don't recognise *ourselves* in the assigned gender** at birth…really instead of **Mr**. I would prefer **Ms**.

Extracts 5 reveal the two-fold process of de-anchoring from both a cis-normative and trans-normative narrative in defining themselves. For instance, participants here not only distance themselves from the identity assigned at birth, but also explicitly refuse the binary trans narrative of moving "from one box to another" (transitioning to become simply "a trans man"). Moreover, these extracts show how de-anchoring is not a clear-cut rejection of previous identity categories (e.g., "I lived as a girl for […] the majority of my life") but it is an ongoing, reflexive process characterised by retaining something of that identity but without necessarily culminating in an opposite target identity.

However, for some participants, de-anchoring from gender identity at birth remains one of the main aims of their transition paths – an identity they "would burn". Here, framing misgendering as being re-anchored to their biological sex (e.g., through deadnaming, pronouns, etc.), while passing as the opposite gender is not equally painful.

Beyond rejecting binaries, non-binary participants also de-anchor identity from gender expression, challenging the assumption that one's appearance, such as clothing or physical characteristics, should determine how one's gender identity is understood. This represents an attempt to disrupt the allegedly automatic binary logic wherein specific forms of embodiment and presentation (e.g., skirts, beards, breasts) are read as inherently signifying binary gender identities (e.g., woman and man). This is not a straightforward process, as shown by Extracts 6, where non-binary participants are sharing their experiences and strategies to express their gender with their non-binary peers.

Extracts 6

1. F3P1: **Even if I don't identify myself as a woman**, I like to wear **skirts**... when I wear skirts, **all the effort I make doesn't**... **doesn't go all the way down**... because in the binary... **binary** *society's mind*, **skirt = woman**. […] **When I'm with *people*,** I resign myself to the fact…if I know *they* are *quiet people* anyway, then I say: "**Look, I'm not really a cis-girl, even if I dress like this**".
2. F7P1: One must **make an effort to assume physical traits that limit the damage as much as possible**, but you have to **destroy your soul with the binder**...

F7P2: Guys, I mean, I'm telling you, it's no use, I **had my breasts removed, but, *they* still call me ma'am anyway**, so, let yourself grow, however it will grow for you, a **beard**, and no one will call you feminine anymore.

F7P1: But someone might also not like having a beard and is **forced to keep it**...

F7P2: But I get myself, I get **fake moustaches**, I put on **fake moustaches**, when I'm fed up, I put on the moustache. But I assure you *they* **don't look at your breasts**. I mean, I'd like to say, "but excuse me, I mean I don't, I don't have breasts, why the fuck are *you* **calling me ma'am**?".

Extracts 6 show the tension between body and identity. On the one hand, non-binary participants attempt to unmake the assumption that physical characteristics and appearance determine gender identity – thus, de-objectifying gender. In other words, they are trying to detach gender identity from specific practices (e.g., wearing a skirt) and body features (e.g., breasts, a moustache, beard) from gender identity. Yet, they are simultaneously forced to manipulate those very characteristics (e.g., beards, binders, chest surgery, fake moustaches) in attempts to control how others read them and – in particular – not to be identified with their gender assigned at birth (e.g., "I don't have breasts, why the fuck are you calling me ma'am?"). This creates a double bind between self-identification and others' recognition, forcing non-binary people to constantly unmake and remake gender (Barbee & Schrock, 2019). Here, the effort to de-anchor gender expression from gender identity, coupled with the need to be recognised by others, paradoxically requires both disengaging and engaging with body modification. This predicament has concrete consequences, as exemplified by the effort of putting on binders that "destroy your soul" and being "forced to keep" a beard. F7P2's story reveals the ultimate futility of these efforts: even after breast removal surgery – a permanent, invasive body modification – others still call them "ma'am", re-anchoring them to their gender assigned at birth based on other physical cues.

Theme 3 – Living in-between

By de-anchoring from binary gender categories, non-binary people escape any definitive definition and occupy a liminal position between established gender categories. In this position, non-binary individuals engage in a meaning-making effort that makes new gender categories emerge, thus promoting a polemical representation of gender (Moscovici, 1988). This is done through multiplying and complexifying gender identity categories: (1) being *both*/*and* and *neither*/*nor* simultaneously (2) making gender identity an open-ended project (3) rooting this liminal identity in pre-binary childhood experiences.

First, in discussing their gender identities, non-binary participants consistently described themselves using plural forms that place them outside traditional male and female categories, such as *both*/*neither* and *and*/*nor* (e.g., combining or refusing elements from traditional gender categories), fluid (e.g., fluctuating between identity categories), or rejecting gender categories altogether. This is well exemplified by the words of our participants, resorting to a wide, varied set of identity labels, alternating names and pronouns, and – ultimately – refusing any definitive gender labels in describing their own identity.

Extracts 7

1. F2P4: I use **both feminine and masculine** pronouns. I like when they are **alternated**, so... I don't have a... it's **not that I have a preference** if you use **both masculine and feminine** in that way or the other. **Alternated**, works very well, as long as it's not only **either one or the other**.
2. F3P3: *People* are offered a label in which **finally there's an option in which they recognise themselves**, namely **non-binarity**, and so *they* say […], because anyway I want **some more androgynous characteristics**, but I don't recognise myself as a man, I don't recognise myself as a woman, **I'm in the middle**.
3. F2P5: *We* use the word "**queer**" as a *community*, because queer, is not, **categorisable**. That is, when, the, which then like this, also works for the feminism movement, that is not only for, for being queer, when **you're not controllable**...

Extracts 7 show how non-binary participants construct liminal identities by occupying positions that exist in-between and outside binary gender categories. This ontological position is reified by recurring to spatial metaphors (e.g., being "in the middle"), or body practices, such as combining or alternating masculine and feminine expression and recognition (e.g., "more androgynous characteristics", "both feminine and masculine pronouns"), while refusing any definitive identification as either a man or a woman. This is further stressed by one of our participants describing how gender is performed in an ambivalent fashion when telling us how they dress at work: "Made up, but without a bra, without padding, with visible hair on my arms, sometimes, with a one-day beard" (F1P5).

Moreover, our participants also converged around the rejection of any categorisation. Extract 7c shows how the "queer" label here functions as a point of mutual recognition among those who resist being "categorisable" or "controllable" by others, revealing an important empowering dimension of liminal identity: it is not simply about individual self-definition but about finding a *communitas* of others who similarly refuse categorical fixity.

This is further reinforced by participants' emphasis on a temporal dimension of identity, describing gender as an ongoing, open-ended process rather than a fixed state. For instance, participants often described how they identified in the past, what they identify with now, and openness to becoming something different in the future. This temporal fluidity reflects a key feature of the liminal nature of non-binary identities, where gender becomes something people experiment with rather than being a stable category established once and for all.

Extract 8

F3P3: The point is that **gender is an experience**... in the way that **sexuality** is, like the **whole entire life** is... the demonisation of the phrase "**it's just a phase**". In my opinion there needs to be a reclaiming of this phrase! It's legitimate that I have this phase, in the way that **life is an entire phase**, and it's made… it's a set of phases in which you go through different experiences. So you **go through different genders**, you go through **different pronouns** in the way that you change, your **body changes**, the *perception that others have of you changes*.

Extract 8 shows how, participants distance gender identity from being a category and redefine it as "an experience" like other things in life. Thus, in the words of our participants, this opens the possibility of moving between genders, pronouns, and body changes, multiplying identity options over time. Crucially, this temporal fluidity is inherently relational. The participant explicitly notes that "the perception that others have of you changes" alongside "the perception that you have of yourself", indicating that occupying a liminal identity position involves ongoing negotiation with others. This challenges the anchoring

logic through which hegemonic gender representations typically place gender identity as a stable one, instead maintaining a state of perpetual becoming where change is expected and welcomed rather than seen as problematic.

In this attempt to legitimise liminal gender identities, some participants located their identities in childhood memories, describing a pre-socialisation state before binary categories were imposed upon them. This temporal anchoring serves to legitimise non-binary identity not as a recent invention or a confused phase, but as a recovery of an original, uncategorised way of being that existed prior to binary gender socialisation.

Extract 9

F2P5: *I grew up* in the woods, and *growing up* in nature, where we didn't have games like... I mean, playing with dolls, or playing with... I mean, *we* played in the woods, so *everyone* with the dirt, everyone with the leaves…So, no, I **didn't grow up like** [pause] **like a girl, I just grew up**. I mean, *no one told me* how I should be, I just played. Then, *at the turn of sexualization*, *they told me,* "look, *we have* decided *you are* a **woman**" so from there I said, "**oh no, there are two categories**" which *was around age 14*, when *someone* started sexualising me, so until then it was "dress how you want, play how you want, do what you want" then afterwards it really seemed like they **handed me a package** "*from now* on you dress like this, *from now* on you behave this way, *from now* on you stop screaming, responding to people in an... unpleasant way, because you have to **become a young lady**".

Extract 9 shows how childhood (i.e., the past) is a site for locating their gender identity before it is anchored to binary identity categories. The participant here describes a pre-categorical freedom that was violently disrupted at puberty when their bodies became sites for binary gender imposition by others: "no one told me how I should be", "I didn't grow up like a girl, I just grew up". Again, this shows how identity is here shaped in *self-other* relations, where binary gender identity is an external imposition: "they told me, 'look, we've decided you're a woman', "they handed me a package". Ultimately, locating their non-binary identity in childhood illustrates how participants mobilise the past to legitimise their identity.

Theme 4 – Call me by my name.

Thus, living in an enduring and devised liminal position outside the gender binary, our participants report the ongoing issue of visibility and recognition as they are (1) *irrepresentable* within existing representations. Ultimately, (2) they engage in the *creation of new symbols* and *practices* to express their own gender identity and have it recognised by others, such as gender inclusive language and non-binary aesthetics.

First, de-anchoring from traditional categories and practices to make sense of gender, non-binary participants report their struggle to express their own identity and have it recognised by others. For instance, our participants often refer to the fact that there are no images, symbols, or practices that can be used to represent non-binary people, thus remaining socially and institutionally invisible.

Extracts 10

1. F2P4: It's the **enigma of my life**, **you don't even know how you make yourself visible**, because how do you make yourself visible? […] **There's no image of a non-binary person**. It's not that, *they* look at you and say: "Ah, how non-binary you look", no, this thing doesn't exist. So, **visibility** is very complex. And when you think you are visible and... *in some places* you are... that is. It's a… it's **dangerous**, **you risk attacks**...
2. F1P5: For us, really, it's an experience of... **invisibilisation**, that is, for *us* the stupidity of **misgendering**, *once, twice, three, a hundred times a day*, it starts to weigh a bit on your personal value, on your sense of yourself, no? The fact of **being recognised** for who you are weighs heavily on **self-esteem,** on **self-identification**, you say "oh my God, so *society* **doesn't believe in me as I do**"... it's not easy.

Extracts 10 show how – in rejecting hegemonic representations of gender – non-binary people create a representational void that raises the issue of visibility (there is no "image of a non-binary person"). This invisibility plays an existential role (e.g., "it

is the enigma of my life"), with participants sharing the constant preoccupation of making "yourself visible".

Here, visibility is shown to be a dialogical pursuit, one that can only be realised if others acknowledge non-binary identities (e.g., "society doesn't believe in me like I do"). On the one hand, this acknowledgement is denied through frequent experiences of misrecognition, which have a relevant impact on "self-esteem" and "identification". On the other, when visibility is realised, it can also represent a concrete threat ("it's dangerous", "you risk aggression"). Ultimately, this produces a tension between the empowering and disempowering dimensions of visibility where being seen is simultaneously a precondition for recognition and a source of exposure to risk (Anderson et al., 2025).

Finally, in facing this representational void and the attempt to tackle their invisibility, non-binary participants actively create new material and symbolic resources to make their identities visible and recognisable. They do so by adopting new linguistic forms (e.g., creating neutral options, periphrasis), proposing new interactional rules (e.g., asking pronouns), and defining new symbols and non-binary aesthetics.

Extracts 11

1. F3P3: I need this language [i.e., neutral] **to be *recognised*** and by this language I feel more **represented**, so if *you* use it with me, I **know that you're *recognising* me**, *you* are telling me ***you* see me** […] The idea is to ask... I go to a *person* and the first thing that I **ask** *them* is **name** and **pronouns**, so I know what names *they* have and what pronouns to use.
2. F2P4: Language, that is, **describes reality**, des…describes what there is, **if an apple is not... not called an apple the apple doesn't exist**. […] the LGBTQIA+ acronym that *many people say* "eh whatever but where will it end, this... now they add..." Yes, because it's **visibility**, because I…as long as I don't put the "A", **the "A" doesn't exist**. And instead, the A people, which stands for aromantic and asexual people, exist. […] When you, **find a word to describe yourself**, it's as if, that is, you start, to exist, that is, the **word exists** and **you exist**, eh, **you can see yourself in *someone else's eyes***.
3. F2P5: Certain icons are taken, even at random, just because of the function of, of, of **the impossibility of**, **of having a representation of non-binary**. So, I don't know if you know the **IKEA shark**, the BLÅHAJ, at random, totally at random, **was a non-binary icon**, because... now on Halloween we all dress up as Allan [laughs], because it's non-binary Allan, because, uhm, **it's not Barbie**, **it's not Ken, and so we're**, **we're Allan**

Extracts 11 show how non-binary participants actively construct new anchors to make sense of their liminal identities in shared meanings. First, through language innovation – creating gender-inclusive pronouns, neutral terms, and new interactional norms (e.g., asking for pronouns) – participants attempt to establish linguistic coordinates for recognition. As F3P3 articulates, language operates as "a tool" for recognition, transforming the abstract act of seeing someone's identity into concrete social practice. Second, these innovations serve an existential function: "if an apple is not called an apple the apple doesn't exist". Here, for participants, naming becomes a precondition for existence itself, showing that they need to re-objectify gender identity – thereby remaking it concrete – to make it recognisable. This creative work transforms non-binary identity from abstract liminality into something materially present in culture, making the previously impossible recognisable: "you can see yourself in someone else's eyes".

Besides language, the existential relevance of recognition then leads non-binary individuals create new symbols to express their own identity, such as "IKEA shark" and "Allan" (from the film "Barbie"), symbols capable of signifying their identity ambivalence and complexity: "it's not Barbie, it's not Ken". This attempt to create shared meaning resources, further highlights how all transitions are social, happening in the *self-other* relationship and that – ultimately – cannot be fulfilled if others do not recognise you. This is well exemplified by a participant describing the feeling of frustration when people refuse to use gender inclusive language and to address them with their pronouns. As in their words, non-binary people live as if they have to ask permission to exist, while they are asking for a simple thing: to be called by their name.

Extract 12

F2P4: **Having to ask permission to exist**. And so "**permission**" and "**please**" and, a whole series of... that *cis people* don't have to ask, and don't ask when they make a request of another type […] *When someone tells you* "ok, sorry", you say: "yes, whatever sorry my ass, go ahead with *what I asked you*". Because *I asked you* for something. I didn't ask *you* a difficult thing, that is I, I'm telling you "please **don't talk to me with my full name**, **call me A.**, and please if, if you can alternate the **pronouns**"... To, to me it doesn't seem like a, **a very difficult request**.

Discussion

Despite the increasing visibility of non-binary identities, social psychology still offers a limited understanding of how these identities are constructed, negotiated, and – in turn – recognised by others. While existing research has largely documented the marginalisation, invalidation, and minority stress experienced by non-binary people (Morgenroth & Means, 2025), less attention has been paid to the dialogical processes through which non-binary identities become intelligible to the self and to others. This gap is particularly relevant in contexts – such as Italy – where non-binary people struggle for social and institutional recognition (Bracco et al., 2024; Rosati et al., 2025), and where the gender binary is embedded in the grammatical structure of language (Baiocco et al., 2023). Addressing this gap, in this study, we analysed seven focus groups to understand how non-binary people construct their identities in dialogue with others. Our discourse-oriented thematic analysis (Batel & Castro, 2018) identified four interrelated themes describing identity work: (1) living within a hegemonic binary, (2) de-anchoring from it, (3) devising a liminal in-between position, and (4) seeking recognition through the creation of new meaning-making resources.

First, this study shows that non-binary identity work has a processual and non-linear nature, as with other identities (Stenner et al., 2019; Zulato et al., 2025). This is well exemplified by participants' accounts describing their identity as an ongoing, open-ended project, thus aligning with emerging research on non-binary transitions (Merlini & Aboim, 2025; Speechley et al., 2024). In particular, our analysis shows how our non-binary participants devise a state of enduring liminality (Greco & Stenner, 2017) that starts with de-anchoring from hegemonic representations, refusing to define gender along traditional and mutually exclusive binary categories (e.g., man and woman). Besides de-anchoring, they also de-objectify gender, unlinking gender identity from the collectively and institutionally recognised images and practices that reify it – thus making it abstract (Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Levitt et al., 2024).

Second, not only do our participants escape a hegemonic representation of gender, but they also promote alternative, polemical representations in which gender identity can be expanded beyond mutually exclusive binaries, thus occupying an enduring liminal position. Through this *pattern shift* (Greco & Stenner, 2017), gender identity is reconceptualised as *both*/*neither* and *and*/*nor* simultaneously, and transitions are rethought as open-ended, unfinished projects rather than movements toward a fixed destination (Merlini & Aboim, 2025). Moreover, our findings add to the literature by showing that participants can legitimise this liminal identity by drawing on their past: as some rooted their in-between identity as a return to a pre-binary self, located in their childhood – before gendered categories were imposed through socialisation. As witnessed in other emerging liminal transitions, the past can thus become a resource for meaning-making (Zulato et al., 2025). By promoting an alternative to the hegemonic representations of gender and transitions that constrain non-binary identity projects, these findings also show that enduring liminal positions are not only negative – creating, for instance, a *paralysis* of common sense and practice (Greco & Stenner, 2017) – but hold an empowering potential, allowing non-binary people to reclaim their identity, experiment with their gender, and fight for recognition, at times with a positive, affirming charge that resonates with what the literature called gender euphoria (Levitt et al., 2024).

However, by defining their gender outside conventional and mutually exclusive categories, non-binary people inhabit a liminal position that is deeply ambivalent. This position offers them the freedom to define and express their identity beyond binary constraints (multiplying gender categories), yet simultaneously creates a representational void that results in a social invisibility through the lack of social and legal recognition.

Thus, this study accounts for the dialogical dimension of identity work (Montali et al., 2022; Zulato et al., 2025), moving beyond individually-focused accounts of non-binary experience (see Morgenroth & Means, 2025). Participants' accounts show that non-binary identity is made sense of in *self-other* relations, at both the relational and institutional levels. In this way, identity is not reducible to self-definition or an individual's "true self", but is both scaffolded by peers and others' recognition. On the one hand, our findings show how peers act as a crucial source of meaning-making resources – providing labels, communities, and practices – through which they can craft their non-binary identities, as shown in foundational work on binary transitions (Mason-Schrock, 1996). This is characteristic of liminal experiences: the lack of visibility and recognition creates the conditions for the emergence of a *communitas* of peers who provide meaning-making resources (Turner & Turner, 1978). On the other hand, others can also play an active role in recognising or invalidating non-binary identities (Amer & Obradovic, 2022). For instance, as documented by previous research (Corby et al., 2025; Jacobsen et al., 2024), non-binary people are often misgendered – and made invisible – by others in everyday social interactions. Moreover, institutional actors emerge here as existential gatekeepers who not only fail to recognise non-binary identities but also require them to give up on their non-binary identity as a precondition for accessing the very medical and legal resources needed for identity affirmation (Murawsky, 2023). For instance, in line with previous literature (Anzani et al., 2023), some participants reported having to declare a desired target gender in order to access medical treatment or a name change. Thus, in dealing with others' perspectives, non-binary people may navigate the paradox of de-anchoring while simultaneously re-anchoring themselves to the mutually exclusive binary categories they reject. This can be understood as a *polarisation* strategy that non-binary people adopted in dealing with others, thus reducing the complexity of their identity to one category within the binary (Greco & Stenner, 2017) and conforming to trans-normative paths. Previous literature has documented this pattern, with non-binary people reporting continuous fluctuations of un-gendering and re-gendering themselves (Barbee & Schrock, 2019) and being forced into trans-normative narratives when transitioning (Johnson, 2016).

Third, as shown by previous research in the Italian context (Anzani et al., 2023; Rosati et al., 2024), this study highlights the particular challenges that grammatically gendered languages pose for non-binary identity construction and recognition. Unlike English, Italian requires gender marking across virtually all elements of language, making every communicative exchange a site of binary imposition (Baiocco et al., 2023; Formato, 2019). In our participants' words, the absence of neutral forms constrains not only how others address non-binary people but also the symbolic resources available to those seeking to construct recognisable identities beyond the binary. For this reason, our participants expressed a willingness to use and engage in creating gender-inclusive language that includes neutral options (such as names and pronouns). This engagement was framed not solely as a defence against misgendering but also as having an existential function, whereby new words become a relief and part of their affirmation path.

Besides its empirical contribution, our findings advance theory in two respects. First, by integrating social representations and liminality theory, this study shows the meaning-making movement involved in constructing liminal identities. Where social representations theory has traditionally emphasised anchoring the unfamiliar to the familiar and objectifying the abstract into the concrete (Andreouli et al., 2019; Zulato et al., 2023, 2025), our analysis foregrounds the opposite movement: de-anchoring from binary categories – both cis-normative and trans-normative – and de-objectifying gender from its conventional bodily and material markers. This extends the theory's account of how novelty emerges, showing de-anchoring and de-objectification not as failures of meaning but as the constructive groundwork of an emerging identity.

Second, our findings show that deconstruction alone is insufficient. In fact, non-binary participants faced with a representational void (i.e., the absence of shared images, symbols, or practices) and found themselves stuck in recognition. While hegemonic representations of gender offer no cultural resources to support their identity making and expression, new ones are not yet in place – or shared by others. Thus, beyond deconstructing gender, our non-binary participants also actively engaged in re-objectification efforts: creating new gender-inclusive linguistic forms, establishing new interactional norms (asking for names and pronouns), and appropriating symbols (the IKEA shark, the character Allan). In doing so, they attempted to create new shared cultural resources and practices to make sense and deal with their emerging identities. In other words, without this re-objectification process, non-binary gender identities would remain unrecognisable to others, with

language playing a central role: “if an apple is not called an apple, the apple doesn’t exist”. In our participants’ words, “naming” thus becomes a precondition for social existence.

Ultimately, this dialogical effort shows that social change cannot be achieved through deconstruction alone, but it requires creating new shared cultural coordinates, as change cannot be real without social recognition (Thomassen, 2013). As our participants’ accounts illustrate, transitions are experienced as not fully complete until relevant others acknowledge them; showing that identity is not only about self-identification, but also about how categories and identities are imposed on us by others who may grant or deny recognition (Howarth, 2002, 2006). In this way, our findings provide further empirical support for recent theoretical work on the importance of recognition in social identity processes (Amer & Obradovic, 2022), but also for the idea that for emerging groups like non-binary people, recognition has an existential role. This calls for social psychology to attend more carefully to the role of recognition in identity processes, complementing frameworks focused on self-identification with an understanding of how identities are dialogically achieved, contested, and at times existentially denied. As powerfully stated by one participant’s words, non-binary people have one simple request: to be called by their name.

Practice implications

Our findings carry relevant implications for practitioners, educators, and institutions working with non-binary people, particularly in gender-marked language contexts. Because recognition is constitutive of non-binary identity, debates over gender-inclusive language, names, pronouns, and institutional recognition should not be treated as secondary symbolic disputes; but they are central for the social existence of non-binary people. For clinicians and counsellors, this suggests reframing affirmative practice: correctly naming a client, using their pronouns, and resisting the pressure to sort them into a binary category are not courtesies but acts of recognition with a bearing on wellbeing (see Hammack et al., 2024; Rosati et al., 2025). Together with this, our study shows the importance of peers in scaffolding identity work, acting as a resource for meaning-making; this suggests the value of promoting spaces in which non-binary people can meet and support one another (e.g., group settings and community networks). For institutions, practices that withhold recognition – gatekeeping that conditions medical or legal transition on a binary declaration, the absence of a legal third-gender option, or services that offer no neutral forms of address – operate as active denials of identity rather than neutral omissions, and continually risk reabsorbing non-binary people into the categories they seek to move beyond. Conversely, at a relational level, comparatively low-cost measures – routinely inviting names and pronouns, and adopting neutral linguistic forms where they exist – function as concrete affirmations. Across these settings, supporting the meaning-making resources non-binary people are already creating may matter as much as removing formal barriers.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be considered in assessing this study’s contributions. First, by drawing on non-binary perspectives only, this study presents only part of a complex dialogue. Others’ perspectives – e.g., cisgender man and women, and trans-binary individuals – emerge here as meta-perspectives (Gillespie, 2008), reported or imagined by our non-binary participants rather than expressed in their own terms. This was a deliberate choice, given that the aim of the study was to provide an in-depth understanding of non-binary perspectives. However, analysing these others’ direct perspectives remains an important focus for future research. Second, the sample was predominantly recruited through LGBTQIA+ community networks in Milan and included mainly participants with progressive political orientation. This may neglect the perspectives of non-binary individuals who are less involved in activist or community contexts, or whose political and cultural backgrounds differ substantially. Third, the focus group methodology, while useful for observing dialogical dynamics across different *self-other* configurations, necessarily reflects shared group narratives. Individual interviews might have surfaced more private, idiosyncratic, or contradictory dimensions of non-binary identity work that are less readily expressed in collective settings. Finally, while the Italian context offered a particularly productive context for examining the interplay between language and identity, comparative research across linguistic and cultural contexts would allow for more nuanced understanding of the specific role that grammatically gendered languages play in shaping non-binary identity construction and recognition.

Declarations

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interest whatsoever that is relevant to the publication of the current article.

Ethical approval

All participants were adults who provided written informed consent prior to taking part. The consent forms, including provisions for anonymising and archiving the data, were approved as part of the ethical review of this project by [redacted for peer review].

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Author Contribution

Author contributions [CRediT taxonomy]:Conceptualization: E.Z., F.D.; Methodology: E.Z., A.C., C.R., F.F., F.D.; Formal analysis and investigation: E.Z., A.C.; Writing – original draft preparation: E.Z.; Writing – review and editing: E.Z., A.C., C.R., F.F., F.D.; Funding acquisition: C.R., F.F., F.D.; Resources: University of Milano-Bicocca; Supervision: E.Z., F.D.

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Data Availability

The data presented in this study has been anonymised and are publicly available [archive DOI].

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