



VIEWS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS ON NON-BINARY IDENTITIES AND NEO PRONOUNS

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Abstract

This research study explores the attitudes and perspectives of college students regarding non-binary identities and the use of neo-pronouns. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with eight diverse postgraduate college students selected through purposive sampling, the study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which individuals perceive and understand gender diversity in contemporary society. Data was collected through offline and telephonic interviews. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's model was used to extract the themes and sub themes. Key themes identified in the study include skepticism and disbelief towards non-binary identities, resistance and rejection of societal acceptance, and the influence of media and pop culture on perceptions of gender diversity. Additionally, the study delves into the role of education in shaping attitudes towards non-binary individuals, as well as personal experiences and interactions that influence individual perspectives. The findings suggest that while some college students demonstrate openness and acceptance towards non-binary identities, others exhibit

skepticism or resistance rooted in traditional binary conceptions of gender. Moreover, the study highlights the impact of social media, educational institutions, and personal experiences in shaping attitudes towards gender diversity.

Keywords: *Non-binary identities, neo pronoun*

Introduction

Overview

One of the earliest learnt conceptions is gender/sex, according to Egan and Perry (2001). Assuming that everyone is cisgender (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012), gender is typically characterized in terms of binary dichotomies (e.g., male/female, man/woman, boy/girl; Richards & Barker, 2013). Individuals who identify as a gender other than the one given to them at birth (transgender people) are particularly impacted by this presumption (McFarland, Wilson, & Raymond, 2017). The ideas of gender and sex are difficult for transgender, gender nonconforming, and agender people to understand since historically, they have not allowed much opportunity for fluidity or flexibility (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Ramirez, 2017; Schudson, Dibble, & van Anders, 2017).

Transgender identity experiences commonly understood in reference to three major aspects of Gender: Gender Identity, Gender Transitions, and Birth Sex (Levitt & 2014 Ippolito).

Non-binary identities

The phrase "non-binary" conveys a wider range of ideas. One who does not fit into the stereotypical male-female gender roles can call themselves "non-binary." People who identify as transgender, intersex, agender, gender-fluid, demigender, multigender, and other non-conventional gender identities are included in this category (Dutta et al., 2023).

It is still unknown how those who identify as non-binary genders differ from others despite this trend and the growing visibility of non-binary people in society.

Theoretical Framework

According to the minority stress paradigm, sexual minorities experience, hostile stressors associated with their identification as a sexual minority, such as homophobic victimization, and as a result, these stressors have a detrimental impact on their health (Meyer, 2003).

Attitudes regarding gender diversity in contemporary India are still shaped by the colonial legacy of moral policing and the imposition of Victorian-era gender norms. The lives and rights of non-binary people are impacted by discrimination, social stigma, and legal obstacles that continue to exist. These obstacles include healthcare, education, employment, housing, and social security (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). Additionally, for a long time, gender non-conforming identities have been incorrectly classified as disorders by psychiatric health diagnoses, which has resulted in stigma and prejudice. This pathologization has extensively permeated society, having an impact on jurisprudence, legislation, and public policy.

With the introduction of the option for people to identify as "others" in the gender category, the 2011 Census was the first national survey in India to acknowledge the country's gender-nonconforming population. This gave those who don't identify exclusively as male or female another way to indicate their gender (Mandal & Debnath, 2020).

Significance of language

Vygotsky's (1986) general approach to development, which stressed the significance of language as a symbolic cultural tool and highlights the fundamental role of language in developing their identities and interactions with others. Thus, discourses can be seen as pre-existing social forms of communication that are shaped by available master narratives and give people a way to interact with those narratives. As a result, language and master narratives can be understood as mutually reinforcing forces (Bamberg, 2004). Participants gave the example of frequently finding it difficult to interact with others due to the lack of terms that accurately capture their experience of being gender queer.

Need and Significance of the Study

It has been previously stated that scientific curricula do not go beyond stigmatized definitions of non-normative genders and sexualities when it comes to gender and sexuality notions

(Datta, 2021). For instance, portrayals of non-normative genders and sexualities are frequently restricted to biology and medical textbooks and curricula, and even then, they are frequently used in the context of diseases and disorders, pathologizing queer and trans people.

People who are oppressed frequently hear messages from society that reduce, devalue, or disparage who they are (Harper, 2007; Ward, 2005, for examples). Common messages may include generalizations or stereotypes about certain characteristics of group identity or behavior (e.g., Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996), insulting names or terms (e.g., Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), and false beliefs or unfounded claims about social standing (e.g., Yee, 1992). Family, work environments, the media, and government or policy are just a few of the places where these harmful social signals can be found (e.g., Henkel, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2006; Mastro, 2003). Individuals may learn to internalize these damaging messages over time, which can result in self-loathing, hatred of oneself, and the conviction that the messages are accurate (e.g., Bessenoff & Snow, 2006; Pyke & Dang, 2003).

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative design, utilizing thematic analysis to explore college students' perspectives on non-binary identities and neo pronouns. Purposive sampling was used to select eight participants aged 20-25, with interviews conducted either face-to-face or telephonically. Ethical considerations were ensured through informed consent and clarification of study objectives. Participants were categorized based on their attitudes towards non-binary identities and neo pronouns (either for or against), with interview questions aimed at eliciting insights into their understanding and interactions with these concepts.

Research Design

The current study employs a Qualitative Research design incorporating thematic analysis.

Sample Distribution

Inclusion Criteria

- The participants must be current postgraduate students.
- The participants must have an understanding of the terms nonbinary and neo pronouns

- The participants must reside in India and be of Indian origin.

Sampling Techniques

Eight participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their views toward nonbinary identities and neo pronouns.

Tools for the Study

The data was collected through face-to-face or telephonic interviews based on the convenience of the participant. The participants were asked semi structured questions and probed based on their answers. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 1 hour. The time and setting were chosen according to the convenience of the researcher and the participants. The interview questions were framed to facilitate the research and were related to the objective of the study. The consent form was circulated to each participant and any questions were clarified. Verbal consent was also taken before recording the interviews and the participants were explained about the concept being studied and the potential triggers that may emerge from the questions. Hence ethical considerations were followed.

The participants were selected and divided based on positive views toward nonbinary individuals and neo pronouns and negative views toward nonbinary identities and neo pronouns. The questions were framed in simple terms to understand the views the youth have toward nonbinary identities and neo pronouns based on their understanding and interactions with them and the medium through which they came across these terms.

The questions were open-ended in nature and simple to go in depth and gain an understanding of people's subjective understanding of the NB identities and neo pronouns. This allows the researcher to get nuanced perspectives and gain deeper insight by not placing rigid restrictions.

Data Analysis

The data was collected and recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis was carried out through thematic analysis by Emilia Clarke and Victoria Braun. Later data analysis is done by

following Braun and Clarke's six step process which includes Familiarization, Coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, Defining themes, and Summarization.

Discussion (*participants in favour of the argument*)

Data analysis revealed that there are 6 main themes:

The first theme is ***Understanding and Awareness***; the 3 sub themes under this overarching theme is Personal interest, different media and learning from experience.

The participants showed a wide variety of knowledge and awareness about neo pronouns and NB identities. While some relied on social media sites like YouTube and Instagram for instructional content, others had a personal connection to NB identities from their own experiences. This emphasizes how important easily accessible and educational materials are to promoting inclusivity and encouraging understanding.

p (3): "So maybe through social media, through news. Okay. Friends and, you know, people who identify themselves with genders other than the traditionally established ones. And again, coming to social media, it could be like, you know, through people's posts, people coming out with awareness. Or even like, you know, gatherings or communities opened for people who would be uncomfortable with identifying themselves with either of the male or female genders."

The second overarching theme is ***social challenges***; the 3 sub themes identified are ignorance, lack of inclusivity and invalidating experiences. Participants emphasized the societal obstacles that NB individuals encounter, including a lack of respect and recognition. The participants voiced worries about how cultural norms, such as gender dysphoria and social marginalization, affect the wellbeing of NB people.

p (1): "I don't know. I think I don't see a lot of NB representation in the media, So I think it is kind of nonexistent. I mean there are some shows like "One day at a time" and mostly it is just the lack of it. I don't think it is acknowledged as much yet. And umm pop culture. I mean I might be very biased when it comes to it, like you know as you are exposed to a lot of things, and I would have wanted to seek for it myself and discover more NB artists and NB culture and that was when I was figuring my own identity out."

The third overarching theme is **Conversations with social groups**; the sub themes under that is Safe Space and Open discussions. The participants' viewpoints were significantly shaped by their personal contact with NB people. While some had firsthand contacts with NB friends, others said they were receptive to understanding and learning even in the absence of such experiences. These exchanges highlight how crucial interpersonal communication is for clearing myths and promoting acceptance.

p (2): "When it comes to social circles I think the friends are very accepting because I think I've just chosen friends like that so they are very pro pronouns and gender diversity and among friend circles around college and stuff it is definitely very positive."

The fourth overarching theme is **Lack of Openness**; the subthemes are gender dysphoria, dismissing identities, stereotyping. The participants stated that a lot of people within the NB community face gender dysphoria and are expected to meet certain societal expectations and norms. The perceptions of NB individuals within the LGBTQ+ community revealed nuanced dynamics of acceptance and rejection. While participants noted overall acceptance, they also acknowledged instances of bias and judgment within the community itself. These findings emphasize the importance of fostering intersectional solidarity and addressing internalized prejudices.

p (1): "Their existence is not even acknowledged. At Least in the Indian context, I feel like they are not very open to learning about it....So since people are not open you do need to kind of hide your identity and you may not be referred to by the pronouns you go by and it may give you gender dysphoria to take options that do not include you cause there will be like gender and options like male and female and I mean those are not even the genders, those are the sexes so in conversations you cannot bring it up or go by the name you prefer to go by."

The fifth overarching theme is **Role of educational institutions**; the sub themes identified are lack of inclusive education and unacknowledgement. Participants felt that educational institutions could do more to address NB identities and pronoun usage. A systemic failure to recognize and accommodate a range of gender identities is reflected in the lack of inclusive curricula and discourse in educational settings.

p (4): "It is even sad when there are people out there in the community and professors go like "no it is only a myth, are you joking? like there are no people like that."

The sixth overarching theme is **Pronoun usage and Importance**; the sub themes are learning and adapting to pronoun usage, importance of pronouns in identity expressions. The importance of honoring people's preferred pronouns and the negative effects of misgendering on the wellbeing of NB individuals were stressed by the participants. These results highlight the necessity of extensive pronoun education and awareness initiatives.

p (1): "Because I know it can be very hurtful if you know...I know it can make the difference between them feeling or not feeling comfortable in their identity. So, to prevent them from feeling some sort of rejection, I try not doing that even if it means using their name more often. Pronouns are more than just being indicative of gender identity; it is something an individual picks out for some reason."

Discussion (participants against of the argument)

The overarching first theme is **Attitude toward Nonbinary identities and neo pronouns**; the sub themes are Skepticism and Resistance and Rejection. The participants' doubts about non-binary identities are indicative of a larger cultural perspective that questions the validity of gender identities that do not fit neatly into a binary. The resistance to accepting non-binary individuals and neo-pronouns underscores the barriers that exist within society. This resistance is rooted in a lack of understanding and empathy, highlighting the importance of promoting inclusivity and diversity in all aspects of life.

p (5):I feel those non-binary identities are useless. Okay. Because of my personal belief, I do support the people from the community, but technically they kind of messed up the whole purpose of the community.

The second overarching theme is **Influence of media and pop culture**; the sub themes are Queerbaiting, Influence of influencers and Toxic positivity. The criticism of media figures and social media influencers illustrates the complexities of representation and advocacy within popular culture. The phenomenon of queerbaiting and performative activism raises questions about authenticity and genuine support for marginalized communities. The notion of "propaganda" suggests a perceived agenda behind the portrayal of gender diversity in mainstream media.

p (7): I think it's all propaganda now. They're doing it because they have an agenda behind it." p (6): "Because in the world of social media, people believe they can do anything on the internet. And, you know, educate people incorrectly and educate people correctly. And it's like more about the media platforms these days. And as much as I appreciate the media platforms for their knowledge, people take them for their face values is my problem."

The third overarching theme is **Perception of gender**; the sub themes are Biology versus Psychology and Cultural influence. Differences in cultural perspectives on gender underscore the complexity of identity construction and the influence of sociocultural factors. Exploring how cultural beliefs and values shape attitudes towards non-binary identities can provide valuable insights into the diverse experiences of individuals worldwide. They express skepticism regarding the concept of gender identity and emphasize biological factors over psychological ones.

p (7): I don't believe in like... I understand that there's male, female, transgender, yeah. But I don't really get the fact that being born in a certain biological... Yeah, having different biology and psychologically identifying something else. Maybe it's just that you have femininity dominant in your personality. Why do you want to say that I identify as a woman?

The fourth overarching theme is **Experiences with pronouns**; the sub themes are personal effort and choice & offense. The respondent acknowledges difficulty in adapting to new pronouns due to ingrained linguistic habits and the difficulty in adapting to new grammar rules and sentence structures. The participants also mentioned how people are easily offended when it comes to the usage of pronouns.

p (6): Because, you know, you must change your whole way of language and the semantics of language around it. Right? Because, you know, the verbs change, everything changes. And imagine learning of a pronoun that you never even knew existed. And figuring out your own language around that and mind you, people have become grammar Nazis of late, right? People are very much into correcting each other.

The fifth overarching theme is **Future acceptance**; the sub themes are Protests and Bleakness. The respondents criticize privileged individuals' involvement in protests and expresses concerns about safety and misuse of identity labels.

p (5): It's a very long run, very long run i would say 100 years like let's give another 100 years gap because i won't even see in 100 years also i would say more than that because presently

as I mentioned it's very all around toxic positivity and toxic acceptance where they are forced to do it."

Summary and Conclusion

The current study was conducted to gain an understanding of how college students view nonbinary identities and neo pronouns. By the study it is evident that there is still a long way to go with awareness and inclusivity regarding this topic. Several key themes have emerged, shedding light on the complexities and challenges surrounding acceptance and understanding in contemporary society. The findings highlight a spectrum of attitudes towards non-binary identities, ranging from skepticism and resistance to acceptance and support. While some participants express skepticism and disbelief, citing concerns about societal norms and the perceived legitimacy of non-binary identities, others demonstrate a more open-minded and inclusive perspective, advocating for empathy and understanding. Moreover, the influence of media and pop culture emerges as a significant factor shaping attitudes towards gender diversity.

The role of education also emerges as a critical factor in shaping attitudes towards non-binary identities. Participants express concerns about the lack of comprehensive education and awareness in educational settings, underscoring the importance of promoting inclusivity and diversity through curriculum development and institutional support.

Looking ahead, the findings suggest the need for continued advocacy and education to promote understanding and inclusivity. Addressing systemic barriers and challenging entrenched attitudes will be essential in fostering genuine acceptance and support for non-binary individuals in college campuses and beyond.

The study may be limited by the composition of the sample, which consists solely of college students. This demographic may not represent the broader population, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research can address this issue by representing different age ranges and demographics in their study. Gaining an overall understanding and holistic understanding of different views is crucial in understanding a nuanced topic like this.

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