

Rethinking genders in the digital landscape: Non-binary identities on Reddit

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Abstract

The accelerating digitalization of everyday life has transformed the cultural and social organization of contemporary societies. Digital platforms mediate key dimensions of identity work, shaping, constraining, and enabling gendered self-knowledge through practices of media consumption, self-presentation, and community engagement. Within this landscape, online environments have become central arenas for the articulation of emerging gender subjectivities. This study adopts an integrated methodological approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how non-binary identities are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized within Reddit communities. Non-binary experiences challenge binary logics of gender classification, revealing the epistemic limitations of dominant frameworks and exposing the ideological nature of normative regimes. Using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) on a corpus of 6,000 top-ranked Reddit posts, complemented by qualitative interpretation and netnographic observation, the research identifies a discursive ecosystem organized around three interrelated dimensions. First, autobiographical narratives foreground affective experiences and reflective processes through which users make sense of their gendered positions. Second, discussions concerning names, pronouns, and social interactions highlight the micropolitics of recognition and the relational labor required to navigate offline contexts. Third, digital rituals of validation enable users to test, refine, and affirm their identities within supportive environments. Together, these dimensions illustrate how Reddit discussions contribute to the collective production of vocabularies and visibility regimes that make non-binary experiences socially intelligible. Theoretically, the study contributes to sociological and queer digital studies by conceptualizing non-binary identity as digitally mediated performativity. Methodologically, it highlights the value of hybrid approaches integrating computational analysis with qualitative interpretation.

Keywords: Non-binary identities, performativity, online, recognition, digital cultures, LDA, netnography.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the accelerating digitalization of everyday life has reshaped the cultural and social organization of contemporary societies. Digital infrastructures have not merely introduced new forms of communication, but they have increasingly mediated key dimensions of interaction, thus contributing to the reorganization of the social world (Calhoun, 1992). The pervasiveness of digital platforms in everyday routines has blurred the boundaries between online and offline environments, encouraging the emergence of hybrid spaces where identity work unfolds continuously and is shaped by the interplay between technological affordances, cultural expectations, and interpersonal feedback (Hepp, 2022).

Within this broader landscape, a large body of scholarship has argued that digital media play a decisive role in shaping, constraining, and enabling sexual and gender identities through practices of media consumption, self-presentation, and community engagement (Andreassen et al., 2018; Wajcman, 2007). As individuals navigate multiple platforms, they are confronted with heterogeneous norms, discourses, and representational regimes that can influence their knowledge of themselves and others, often in complex and ambivalent ways.

Early studies about this topic embraced a markedly optimistic outlook. Scholars working in the 1990s regarded online environments as inherently more democratic than offline social spaces, emphasizing their capacity to foster autonomy and self-expression (Bruckman, 1996; Stallabrass, 1995). This optimism emerged in a socio-cultural moment when digital technologies were still unfamiliar and relatively unregulated, and when the novelty of computer-mediated communication fueled expectations about its emancipatory potential. In gender studies, it was widely believed that the Internet could offer women new opportunities for participation, creativity, and empowerment that were often more limited in offline contexts (Reid, 1991). The anonymity and flexibility associated with early digital platforms were viewed as mechanisms that could reduce the impact of gendered power relations and weaken the social hierarchies embedded in physical interactions (Turkle, 1995). These perspectives were aligned with an idea of cyberspace as a realm of freedom, where individuals could present themselves as they wished, unburdened by the normative constraints, social surveillance, or material embodiment that shape interactions in the physical world. Online communication was therefore described as an arena in which simulation enabled the exploration of identity (Stone, 1995). Users could experiment with new gendered expressions, adopt alternative personas, or disengage from conventional expectations about appearance, behavior, and social roles. In these early accounts, the digital sphere appeared to be as a kind of laboratory for self-fashioning, offering limitless possibilities for experimenting with identity configurations that could challenge dominant cultural scripts.

Subsequent works (Van Doorn, 2011; Yumartov & Shuvalova, 2021) have continued to draw upon this tradition, suggesting that the partial detachment from material embodiment characteristic of online platforms can open new avenues for gender experimentation.

As digital technologies became increasingly embedded in everyday life, however, scholars shifted their focus from visions of disembodied freedom to more critical analyses of the ways in which online environments shape sexuality, gender, and self-perception. The widespread adoption of smartphones, social networking sites, and algorithmically curated feeds exposed the limitations of the early narratives. Research conducted from the early 2000s onwards has shown that online spaces influence sexual exploration well beyond the realm of “cybersex”, enabling users to enact diverse identities and to connect with supportive communities (Burgess et al., 2016; Lupton, 2015; 2016; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999).

The centrality of digital platforms to identity construction should also be viewed in historical terms. Early studies on social network sites tended to conceptualize online interaction as an extension of offline socialization, emphasizing how users employed digital environments to maintain peer relations, expand friendship networks, and participate in emerging “networked publics” (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In this phase, online spaces were often described as complementary arenas in which pre-existing social ties and identity positions could be displayed, negotiated, or experimented with.

As social media became more deeply embedded in everyday life, however, scholars increasingly shifted their attention from online interaction as a supplement to offline relations to social media as a constitutive infrastructure of social life itself. Platform profiles, posts, photographs, comments, and interaction metrics became durable elements of social presence, shaping how individuals present themselves, anticipate audiences, and manage visibility across multiple social contexts.

Research on social media performativity has been particularly important in clarifying this shift. Hogan (2010), building on Goffman, distinguished between synchronous performances and asynchronous “exhibitions,” showing how social media profiles, and status updates persist over time and become part of the user’s public self-presentation. Marwick and boyd (2011) further demonstrated how users navigate “imagined audiences” and context collapse, as social media bring together friends, family members, colleagues, strangers, and publics that would often remain separated in offline life. Cover (2012), drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity, argued that social networking practices are performative acts through which identity is repeatedly produced, stabilized, and potentially undone. These contributions show that social media have transformed identity work from episodic acts of online self-expression into continuous processes of audience management, visibility regulation, and relational negotiation.

Within this framework, digital technologies can be considered agents of gender socialization whose effects vary depending on the affordances of specific platforms and the practices of individual users (Ross et al., 2021; Flores & Antunes, 2023). Each platform creates distinct conditions for the expression of gender identity, shaping what can be said, seen, archived, circulated, and recognized. Features such as content moderation policies, interface design, algorithmic recommendation systems, anonymity, persistence, voting mechanisms, and community norms all influence how users learn about gender, and express their own identities (van Dijck et al., 2018). This is especially relevant for LGBTQ+ users, for whom social media may represent informal learning environments, spaces of

identity exploration, and sites of peer-based validation when offline contexts remain constrained by cisnormative expectations (Duguay, 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016).

The performative dimension of gender acquisition (Butler, 1990) becomes evident in digital contexts, where user interactions, posts, comments, and visual self-presentations accumulate to form recognizable patterns of behavior and discourse (Carter, 2014; Santinello, 2017). Digital environments can thus play a significant role in shaping identity construction, contributing to the formation and re-formation of gendered self-images and enabling users to operationalize diverse forms of gender through platform-specific behaviors, expressive repertoires, and modes of social interaction (Caldeira et al., 2018; Fotopoulou, 2016a). Importantly, digital spaces offer opportunities for both conformity and disruption. They can support individuals in exploring non-normative identities, finding communities that affirm their experiences, and articulating forms of gender expression that may not be recognized or validated in offline settings (Bollmer, 2018). However, these environments can also expose users to heightened forms of scrutiny, hostility, and surveillance, especially when their identities challenge dominant norms. More specifically, online environments can also reinforce traditional gender scripts, sometimes reproducing inequalities or generating new forms of vulnerability, such as those promoted within the “manosphere” (Cannito et al., 2021; Cousineau, 2021; Ging, 2019) or homonationalist discourses (Liu & Miao, 2025).

These developments make it imperative to interrogate how gender and sexuality are constructed through media production and consumption, to identify dominant discourses, and to analyze how symbolic materials emerging in digital cultures reflect wider social agreements that legitimize specific forms of difference or inequality. Analyzing these dynamics is crucial not only for documenting emerging forms of identity but also for tracing the subtle processes through which digital cultures contribute to the reproduction or transformation of gender norms. By examining digital interactions, social sciences can uncover the cultural negotiations through which individuals make sense of their experiences, seek recognition, and challenge the constraints imposed by dominant narratives.

Rheingold’s early definition of virtual communities emphasized the emergence of webs of personal relationships through sustained public discussion, while subsequent research has shown that online groups can generate distinctive practices, regulate participation, and actively enforce community standards (Rheingold, 1993; Kozinets, 1999). For individuals whose identities are marginalized or difficult to articulate in offline settings, digital communities may therefore operate as spaces of identity demarginalization, allowing users to encounter similar others, transform stigmatized self-understandings into collectively validated identities, and elaborate alternative frameworks (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Despite a growing body of scholarship on LGBTQ+ experiences online, non-binary identities remain under-examined in both social theory and empirical research, particularly in relation to user-generated platforms. Existing studies have tended to focus on gay, lesbian, or transgender experiences, often underestimating the binary frameworks that non-binary individuals explicitly challenge (Coppola & Monaco, 2025; Eickers, 2024; Light et al., 2008; Masullo & Coppola, 2021; Zervoulis et al., 2020). Yet, non-binary people

do not identify exclusively as male or female and thus unsettle the normative assumptions embedded in binary gender systems. Their identities introduce forms of subjectivity that resist conventional categorization, exceed the limits of institutional recognition, and undermine the cultural logics through which gender is typically viewed (Borrelli, 2024; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Accordingly, non-binary identities expose the historical and ideological nature of gender classification itself. By refusing the binary, individuals articulate an embodied critique of the socio-cultural structures that seek to categorize bodies, desires, and practices within fixed oppositional terms. This refusal constitutes an act of resistance that destabilizes the ontological premises of gender, challenging the presumption that gender must correspond to a stable, dimorphic model anchored in biology or legal frameworks (Monaco, 2024; Schug, 2020). Furthermore, non-binary subjectivities highlight the inadequacy of dominant representational regimes that continue to privilege recognizable gender scripts. Their lived experiences often reveal gaps in language, policy, and cultural imagination, making visible the constraints that individuals face when their identities do not align with socially sanctioned categories (Monaco, 2025; Risman & Fleming, 2022; Rosati et al., 2024). In this sense, non-binary identities can be considered as analytical thresholds: they force social theory to confront its own conceptual limitations and compel empirical research to adopt more flexible, pluralistic, and situated approaches capable of capturing gender's complexity in the digital age (Corbisiero & Monaco, 2024; Vincent, 2018).

This paper addresses the research gap by examining how non-binary identities are articulated, negotiated, and legitimized within Reddit communities. The study focuses on how users describe their gendered experiences, how they seek recognition from peers, and how community interactions contribute to stabilizing or transforming emerging forms of non-binary identity. By analyzing discussions within non-binary subreddits, the research aims to identify the discursive patterns, shared narratives, and collective practices through which users construct meaning around their gender. The study does not aim to generalize to all non-binary experiences, nor to all digital spaces in which non-binary identities are formed, contested, or affirmed. Rather, it focuses on a specific empirical site: highly visible discussions within selected Reddit communities dedicated to non-binary identity. This allows to examine how particular subreddit environments participate in the discursive construction of non-binary subjectivities, while remaining attentive to the limits of Reddit as one platform among many within a broader digital ecology.

Theoretically, this paper contributes to the study of gender and digital media, expanding existing debates and offering a more nuanced account of how contemporary digital environments shape non-binary subjectivities. More broadly, the paper also contributes to research on outsider and counter-cultural community development online by showing how non-binary Reddit spaces produce social support, but also alternative regimes of gender intelligibility.

From a methodological standpoint, the paper proposes an integrated and reflexive approach, arguing for the adoption of mixed and hybrid methodological frameworks capable of capturing the multidimensional nature of non-binary identity construction online. Digital environments generate heterogeneous forms of data which cannot be adequately analyzed through a single methodological lens. The integration of

computational techniques with interpretative approaches enables a richer knowledge of the logics, tensions, and practices that characterize non-binary discussions on Reddit, revealing both macro-level trends and the micro-level nuances embedded in individual narratives.

At the same time, the paper emphasizes the need for a reflexive methodological orientation, particularly when researching marginalized communities. Issues of anonymity, representation, and potential harm require careful navigation, and the research design incorporates ethical considerations at every stage. This reflexive stance also acknowledges the positionality of the researcher and the epistemological limitations inherent in studying identities that are fluid, context-dependent, and sometimes strategically obscured or fragmented across platforms.

2. Method

Over the past decade, the digitization of everyday interactions has profoundly expanded the repertoire of tools available to social researchers, allowing them to access, trace, and analyze cultural practices that unfold across platforms. Online environments generate vast amounts of naturally occurring data, produced without direct researcher intervention, and thus offer unprecedented possibilities for investigating social phenomena as they emerge in real time (Lupton, 2014). Digital traces - posts, comments, upvotes, user exchanges, and the rhythms of online participation - constitute socio-technical artefacts that form the empirical backbone of contemporary digital sociology, enabling researchers to reconstruct processes that would otherwise remain elusive (Tinati et al., 2014).

This study draws on these potentials, by examining a corpus of discussions collected from publicly accessible subreddits dedicated to non-binary experiences. Reddit was selected as the research site not simply because it hosts user-generated content, but because its socio-technical architecture differs in important ways from other major social media platforms (LaFlamme, 2025). Whereas platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or X/Twitter are primarily organized around individual profiles, follower networks, algorithmic feeds, and the circulation of highly visible personal or multimedia content, Reddit is structured around discrete affinity-based communities, known as subreddits (Amaya et al., 2021). These subreddits can be considered as semi-autonomous spaces organized around specific interests, identities, practices, or problems, each with its own rules, interactional expectations, moderation practices, and internal culture. This architecture makes Reddit particularly suitable for studying processes of community-based meaning-making, because discussions are embedded within collectively maintained spaces of affiliation.

This distinction is relevant for the present study. Non-binary identity work on Reddit does not occur in a generic social media environment, but within subreddits that explicitly frame themselves as spaces for non-binary, questioning, and gender-diverse users. Compared with profile-centered platforms, Reddit's subreddit structure enables researchers to study how identity categories are collectively discussed, stabilized,

contested, and made meaningful within bounded yet porous digital communities. In this sense, Reddit allows the analysis to focus not only on individual self-presentation, but also on the community-level production of shared vocabularies, and recognition norms.

A further distinctive feature of Reddit is its model of community-based moderation. Reddit combines site-wide policies with subreddit-specific rules created and enforced by volunteer moderators. These moderators are members of the communities they help govern, which gives them a crucial role in shaping local norms, defining acceptable participation, managing conflict, and maintaining the boundaries of the group. For this reason, moderation is an object of sociological significance: it participates in the production of the discursive environment within which non-binary identities are expressed, validated, and negotiated (Thach et al., 2024).

Reddit's voting system must therefore be considered in relation to this community architecture. Upvotes and downvotes contribute to the visibility of posts within specific subreddit publics, making certain narratives, questions, and forms of support more prominent than others (Medvedev et al., 2017). In combination with subreddit rules and moderator interventions, voting mechanisms help shape which forms of experience become more visible, resonant, or legitimate within the community.

Data collection was carried out through systematic scraping of threads that explicitly discuss non-binary identities. All materials were drawn exclusively from publicly available content, in accordance with international ethical guidelines for online research (Warrell & Jacobsen, 2014). The resulting dataset comprises a heterogeneous collection of original submissions/posts, while comments and replies were used only in the qualitative and netnographic phase to contextualize the discussions.

The study adopts a hybrid methodological framework that integrates computational social science techniques with interpretative qualitative approaches. The rationale for combining these methods lies in the ability of mixed approaches to compensate for the limitations inherent in any single technique, ensuring both macro-level pattern detection and micro-level sensitivity (Robinson, 2022).

By using different analytical perspectives, the research enhances both methodological robustness and epistemic reliability, producing insights that more closely approximate the complexity of the social phenomena under investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Accordingly, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was implemented (Figure 1).

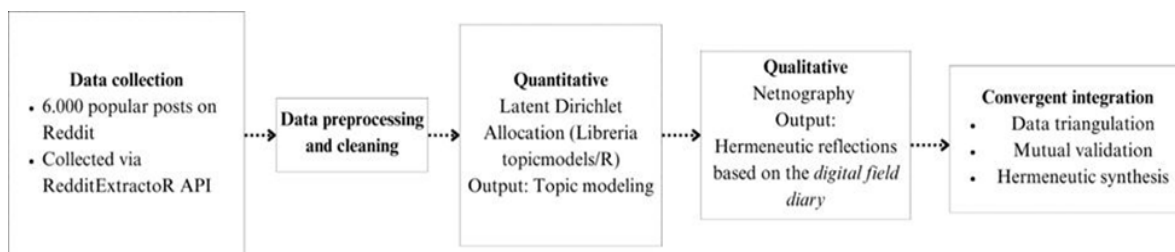


Figure 1. Visual model of the research design

In this configuration, large-scale computational analysis served as the initial phase, providing a systematic overview of discursive patterns across the dataset. Data used to analyze discussions in subreddits dedicated to non-binary issues was collected through web scraping techniques using Reddit's official API via the RedditExtractoR package, which can extract textual content from posts on the platform. This detection technique allowed to select specific subreddits of interest: r/NonBinary, r/NonBinarytalk, and r/enby (Table 1). These subreddits were chosen because of their long presence on Reddit and their exclusive focus on topics related to non-binary gender identity, ensuring a pool of discussions relevant to the study. They were also selected because they exemplify Reddit's community-based architecture: each subreddit constitutes a distinct affinity space with its own rules, moderation practices, participation norms, and degrees of specialization around non-binary identity. This allowed the study to examine non-binary identity construction as a process embedded in locally governed digital communities.

Data extraction was carried out over a period of two years at different times in order to obtain a broad overview of the discussions while taking into account RedditExtractoR's restrictions on the maximum time range of extractable content. Therefore, accidental sampling was used, with a final sample of 6,000 top-ranked original posts collected. These posts are those that received higher levels of positive community evaluation and visibility, primarily through upvoting and engagement. The corpus should therefore be considered as a visibility-oriented sample rather than a statistically representative sample of all posts published in the selected subreddits. This sampling strategy was appropriate for the purposes of the study, which aimed to analyze the narratives and discursive patterns that became most resonant and visible within non-binary Reddit communities. At the same time, it necessarily underrepresents less visible, less upvoted, newly posted, or more controversial contributions.

Subreddit	Description	Date created	Members
r/NonBinary	A subreddit for people of every stripe who feel that they don't fit into a preference-binary or gender-binary culture.	October 20, 2012	277,000 (approx.)
r/enby	An inclusive community for nonbinary & questioning people of all ages. All LGBTQ are welcome including allies. Keep posts SFW and don't post anything lewd, thanks. Consistently violating the rules will get you banned.	March 24, 2016	19,000 (approx.)
r/NonBinaryTalk	Welcome! This subreddit is a 'general forum' where non-binary people can come together to socialize casually and discuss any topic. Politics are prohibited. Talking about politics is discouraged and should be directed to /r/genderqueer instead.	April 6, 2016	43,000 (approx.)

Table 1. Characteristics of the subreddits considered

The textual data extracted from the Reddit platform, often characterized by rich informational content, is distinguished by a high presence of noise and lexical redundancy. In order to transform the textual material into a dataset suitable for statistical analysis, it was necessary to subject it to a pre-processing process. The objective of this phase was to clean the data, but also to reorganize and normalize it, with the aim of extracting maximum semantic value while preserving the information pool of the textual corpus. This operation was followed by a multi-stage text normalization process. Initially, the corpus was cleaned of all textual elements that, while functional for digital interaction, make little or no semantic contribution to thematic analysis. HTML tags, URLs, references to other users (mentions), and hashtags were then removed, as they were considered meta-information irrelevant for thematic modeling (Blei et al., 2003). The next phase was text standardization, aimed at reducing the complexity of the vocabulary. The corpus was converted to lowercase letters to prevent purely orthographic variations of the same word from being considered by the model as distinct units. Subsequently, the text was segmented into discrete units (tokenization), generating an inventory of terms that forms the basis for subsequent analyses. The so-called “stop words,” (such as articles, prepositions, and conjunctions), which contribute to the grammatical structure but not to the thematic meaning of a document, were then eliminated from this inventory. In addition to standard stop-word removal, particular attention was paid during the interpretation phase to the presence of highly frequent but weakly discriminating terms. Some words, such as “nonbinary” and “gender,” were expected to appear frequently across the corpus because they were closely related to the sampling frame itself. Other terms, such as common verbs or generic conversational markers, also appeared across topics without necessarily providing strong thematic differentiation. For this reason, the interpretation of the LDA model did not rely exclusively on the first ten terms ranked by relevance. Topic labels were assigned through an integrated reading of broader lexical patterns, representative posts, selected comment threads, and netnographic field notes.

To further consolidate the vocabulary and refine the semantic representation, lemmatization was applied, which allowed each term to be traced back to its base form or lemma (for example, the words “running,” “ran,” and “runs” are all traced back to the verb “run”), using RStudio software (version 2025.05.1+513).

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was then applied to the cleaned and pre-processed corpus to identify recurrent linguistic patterns, thematic clusters, and salient keywords. It is a three-level Bayesian generative model that operates on the assumption that each document within a corpus can be represented as a probabilistically weighted mixture of a predefined number of latent topics (Chauhan & Shah, 2021; Garg & Rangra, 2022). The corpus was converted into a document-term matrix (DTM), a matrix representation in which the rows correspond to documents and the columns to terms, with values indicating the frequency of each term in each document. The LDA algorithm was then applied to the DTM, implemented through the *topicmodels* package (Grün & Hornik, 2011) in RStudio.

To identify the optimal number of latent topics within the corpus, the analysis followed a systematic validation strategy (Zhao et al., 2015). A series of LDA models with values of k ranging from 2 to 10 were estimated and evaluated through both quantitative and qualitative criteria. Quantitatively, model selection relied on the Cv semantic coherence

metric (Röder et al., 2015), a well-established indicator of the internal consistency of topics. Coherence scores were computed for each value of k and compared to identify the specification that maximized semantic interpretability. Each model was also examined through inter-topic distance mapping, which allows for an assessment of the degree of thematic separation or overlap between clusters (Sievert & Shirley, 2014). The coherence curve was used as the primary diagnostic tool for integrating these evaluative components. As illustrated in Figure 2, coherence values reach their peak at $k = 3$, indicating that this model configuration provides the highest degree of semantic co-occurrence among the words constituting each topic.

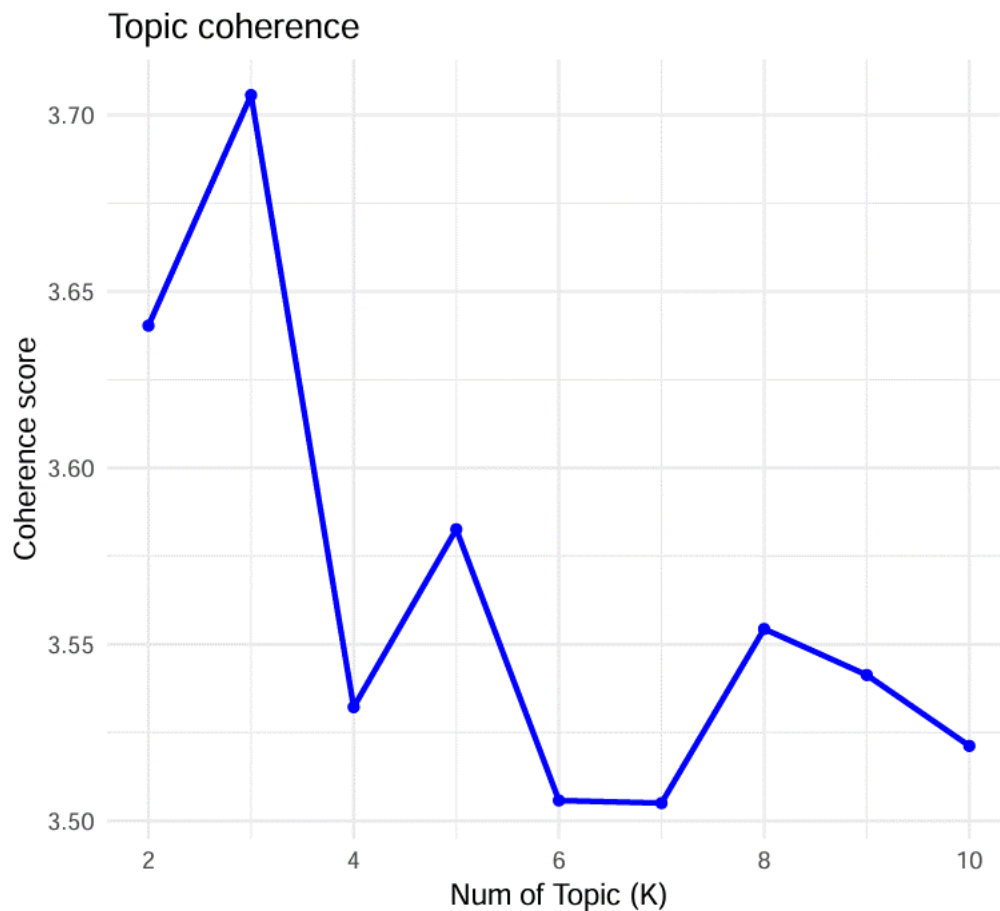


Figure 2. Number of topics based on semantic coherence (Cv) with $k = 3$

Importantly, the selection process was also informed by methodological considerations grounded in queer research traditions. Consistent with calls to “queerize” textual analysis (Browne & Nash, 2016), the objective was to identify a model that remained parsimonious enough to preserve the legibility of overarching discursive structures, yet flexible enough to avoid reifying fluid, relational, and context-dependent identity positions into rigid analytical categories. This approach aligns with Boellstorff’s (2020) argument that

methodological choices in digital research must remain attentive to the processual, situated, and culturally embedded nature of gendered subjectivities.

Taken together, these quantitative and epistemological considerations ensured that the selected model was not only statistically robust but also conceptually suitable for the analysis of non-binary identity negotiations on Reddit.

Since the corpus was drawn from three different subreddits, the possibility that the topic structure may partly reflect subreddit-specific orientations was considered during the interpretative phase. This is an important methodological issue because each subreddit has its own history, rules, moderation practices, audience composition, and interactional culture. As a result, some thematic patterns may be shaped not only by broader discourses on non-binary identity, but also by the specific community environments in which posts were produced and made visible.

For this reason, during the qualitative and netnographic phase, attention was paid to the different orientations of r/NonBinary, r/NonBinaryTalk, and r/enby in order to avoid reading the LDA output as detached from its community-specific contexts. However, the study does not include separate LDA models for each subreddit or a statistical robustness test by subreddit. This limitation is acknowledged and should be addressed in future research through subreddit-specific models or comparative subcorpus analyses.

Once the number of topics for the model was established, an intertopic map was produced (Figure 3).

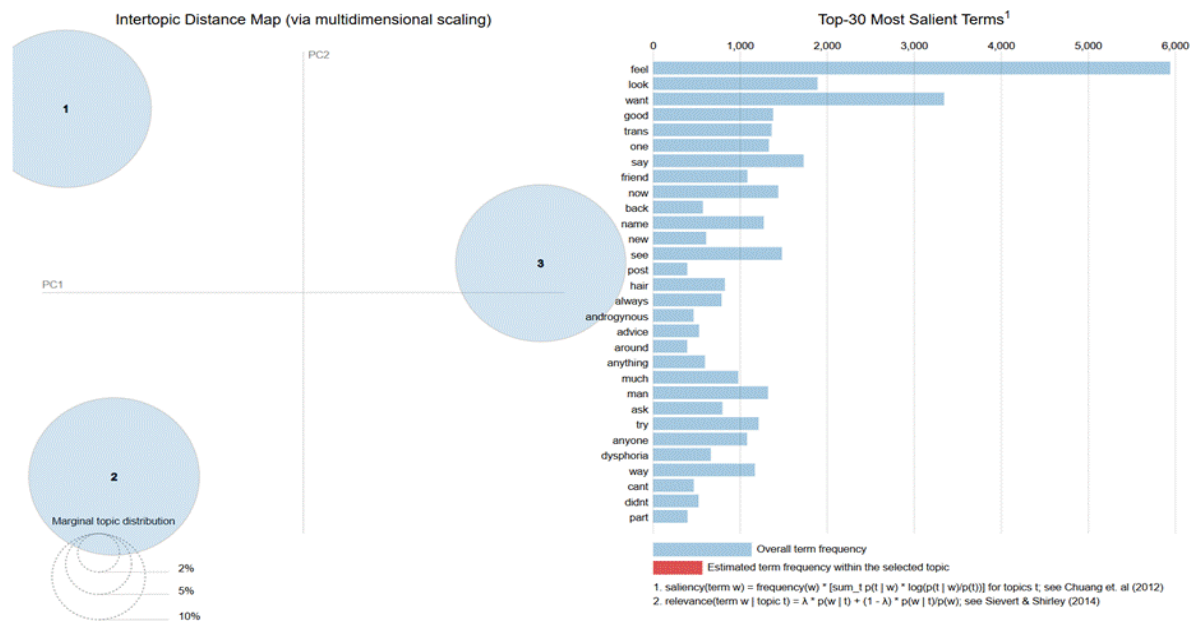


Figure 3. Intertopic map of the model with $\lambda = 0.6$

Word co-occurrences give rise to a set of topics represented visually as circles. The geometric distance between these circles indicates the degree of semantic similarity: topics positioned closer share a greater portion of their underlying vocabulary, whereas those located farther apart reflect more distinct and internally differentiated thematic structures.

While the map suggests that the three topics occupy distinguishable areas of the semantic space, distances in LDA visualizations are affected by dimensional reduction and scaling procedures. For this reason, the analysis of topic distinctiveness was not based on the visualization alone, but on the combined assessment of coherence scores, topic prevalence, distinctive lexical patterns, representative posts, and qualitative/netnographic interpretation. The results were obtained with $\lambda = 0.6$, i.e., with the relevance criterion that balances the prevalence of a term within a topic ($p(w|t)$) with its distinctiveness with respect to the overall corpus ($p(w)$). This value of λ (expressed in Log-Probability) produces words that are both frequent in the topic and relatively specific compared to other topics.

The LDA model was used as a structured entry point into the corpus. The second phase of the study consisted of a qualitative deepening of the topics through thematic and netnographic analysis. The sociological meaning of each topic was therefore established through the qualitative analysis of representative posts, selected comment threads, and netnographic field notes. As suggested by Kozinets (2010), netnography involves systematic observation, interpretation, and contextualization of interactions occurring within online communities, treating them as culturally meaningful social spaces. It consists in immersing oneself in the digital field, analyzing the narratives, practices, and symbolic repertoires that emerge through occurring exchanges while remaining attentive to the socio-technical conditions that shape participation and visibility. This approach allows the researcher to reconstruct the experiential, relational, and affective dimensions of online interactions, to identify the shared norms and interpretative frameworks that guide community debates, and to capture the subtle ways in which users negotiate identity, recognition, and belonging within platform-specific environments (Fetters et al., 2013). The non-participatory observation was conducted from October 2023 to October 2025, in order to collect a series of contextual notes useful for enriching and contextualizing the analysis of the topic. The collection of netnographic data was based on the compilation of a detailed digital field diary and the hermeneutic analysis of 500 collected posts, in which detailed observations were noted on the threads that exemplify the topics identified by the LDA. Information was collected on the community dimension of each subreddit, including written and unwritten rules, shared values, internal conflicts, symbolic meanings, moderator interventions, and the ways in which users oriented themselves toward community norms. Although moderator-authored posts were not analyzed as a separate subsample, moderator visibility, rule enforcement, pinned posts, and community guidelines were considered as part of the netnographic context.

3. Analysis

From the corpus, three topics and their main words were identified (Table 2). Since several high-frequency terms appeared across topics, Table 2 should be read as an exploratory representation of the model rather than as a self-sufficient basis for the analysis. Topic labels were therefore developed by combining the LDA output with the qualitative analysis of representative posts, selected comment threads, and netnographic field notes, while also considering the rules, orientations, and interactional norms of each subreddit.

Intertopic table					
Topic 1 (33.4%)		Topic 2 (33.4%)		Topic 3 (33.2%)	
Term	Relevance ($\lambda = 0.6$)	Term	Relevance ($\lambda = 0.6$)	Term	Relevance($\lambda = 0.6$)
Feel	-1.6479667	want	-1.8045001	look	-1.900203
One	-2.2091291	feel	-1.9014815	person	-2.1068701
Now	-2.2431351	good	-2.181275	say	-2.1510967
Person	-2.2657881	nonbinary	-2.2620458	trans	-2.1765172
See	-2.3439315	think	-2.3746487	go	-2.2750602
Man	-2.476969	friend	-2.4486573	know	-2.3228036
Gender	-2.5084329	get	-2.4733123	try	-2.3777568
New	-2.5117672	name	-2.4812789	gender	-2.3833297
Make	-2.5524622	always	-2.5312243	get	-2.3955817
Know	-2.5708315	back	-2.5400751	nonbinary	-2.3959812

Table 2. Intertopic table of the top 10 entries by thematic relevance ($\lambda = 0.6$)

The first topic (labelled “*Narratives of identity introspection*”) is characterized by a lexical field dominated by verbs and expressions that signal internal states and reflexive activity—*feel*, *think*, *want*—combined with terms referring to the body, gendered categories, and medical-psychological vocabulary such as *dysphoria*, *gender*, *man*, *body*. This constellation of words points to a discursive space in which users articulate the tension between felt experience and normative expectations, framing gender not as a

fixed attribute but as an ongoing and embodied process. The recurrent appearance of temporally situated markers such as *now* underscores the immediacy and situatedness of these reflections: users narrate identity as something lived in the present, yet constantly negotiated in relation to potential futures. From an interpretative standpoint, rather than presenting gender as a stable category, Reddit users perform a continuous “work of the self” in which introspection, biographical reflection, and affective sense-making intersect. The topic thus captures a form of phenomenological inquiry, where individuals attempt to align or reconcile bodily sensations, emotional states, and social categories in order to articulate a coherent sense of self. The interactional dimension of this topic becomes visible in threads where users do not simply declare an identity, but ask the community how to manage uncertain feelings. In these exchanges, introspection is collectively scaffolded through responses that normalize doubt, decenter diagnostic certainty, and invite experimentation. For example, in one thread, an original poster frames their experience through uncertainty, asking whether discomfort with gendered expectations is “enough” to identify as non-binary. Replies do not impose a definitive category; rather, they reframe non-binary identity as an exploratory process. Users often respond by suggesting that labels can be temporarily inhabited, that pronouns can be tested in safe contexts, and that the absence of a fully coherent narrative does not invalidate one’s experience. These exchanges show that introspection is an interactional practice through which the community offers resources for making ambiguous feelings intelligible.

Netnographic immersion provides additional layers to this analysis. Close observation of user discussions shows that terms such as *dysphoria* are rarely employed in a strictly clinical sense. Instead, they represent discursive resources, used to describe a wide spectrum of discomforts, misalignments, or affective frictions that exceed biomedical definitions. Users repurpose these categories to narrativize their experiences, often linking them to personal histories, cultural environments, or institutional encounters. In doing so, dysphoria becomes part of a broader hermeneutic project: a way to name, contextualize, and legitimize feelings that do not fit neatly within binary expectations. Moreover, the co-occurrence of words such as *person* and *see* indicates that introspection on Reddit is never purely inward-looking. Self-understanding is mediated by the imagined or anticipated gaze of family members, peers, medical professionals, and the broader public. Posts frequently reveal attempts to negotiate the gap between how individuals *feel* internally and how they believe they *are seen* or *will be seen* by different audiences. This confirms the profoundly relational nature of gendered self-definition, where the internal and external dimensions of identity remain inseparable. The prominence of *want* further suggests that identity construction unfolds through desire and aspiration. Users articulate who they believe they are but also who they might become, expressing hopes, uncertainties, and future-oriented orientations that shape their gendered trajectories. This temporal and aspirational dimension positions identity as an anticipatory practice, where individuals experiment with narratives that open pathways toward more livable futures.

The second topic (labelled “*Practices of social and interpersonal recognition*”) emerges from a lexical constellation dominated by terms such as *want*, *feel*, *good*, *friend*,

name, ask, use, always, in systematic association with *nonbinary* and *gender*. From a quantitative perspective, the LDA model identifies a stable cluster of co-occurrences that points to a discursive arena centered on the desire to be addressed, perceived, and treated in ways that align with one's gendered self-understanding. Here, recognition is not conceptualized as an abstract norm, but as a concrete, everyday practice mediated by specific linguistic and behavioral choices. Qualitative interpretation deepens this insight, suggesting that, for non-binary individuals, recognition operates through a constellation of micro-acts: the consistent use of chosen pronouns, the adoption of a self-selected name, or the freedom to dress, speak, and behave outside the constraints of binary expectations. These practices are described as foundational elements of identity affirmation. The affective dimension emerges in the recurrent pairing of *feel* with *good*, signaling that well-being is intimately tied to whether interactions validate or undermine one's gendered position. Netnographic immersion further analyzed this dynamic, revealing that Reddit operates as a collective repository of strategies for navigating recognition. Users do not only recount autobiographical episodes; they actively seek advice, propose communicative formulas, and evaluate the effectiveness of different relational tactics. This creates a shared repertoire of recognition practices that exceeds individual experiences and circulates within the community as a form of collective knowledge. This aspect emerges most clearly in comment threads where users collectively elaborate practical strategies for managing misrecognition. When a user describes being deadnamed by a friend or misgendered by a family member, responses usually move across emotional validation, pragmatic advice, and boundary-making. Some users affirm the legitimacy of the poster's pain, while others suggest concrete scripts for correcting relatives, negotiating pronoun use, or deciding when to disengage from invalidating interactions. In this sense, recognition is rehearsed within Reddit itself, where users collectively test the language through which future recognition may be demanded. Computationally, this resonates with the proximity of terms such as *name, feel, friend, good*, reinforcing the centrality of interpersonal settings in shaping gendered experiences. Similarly, the importance of the chosen name surfaces as a principal theme across the cluster. Posts describe the adoption of a new name as a moment of profound symbolic alignment, yet also highlight the social labor required to sustain this recognition. The tension between self-affirmation and pedagogical authority becomes a recurring thematic thread, reflected computationally in the joint presence of terms such as *ask, want, use, always*. Moreover, recognition practices extend beyond interactions with cisnormative environments. They also operate within the non-binary and broader trans community itself, where normative pressures can emerge around medicalized transitions. This highlights how recognition includes the right to distance oneself from dominant narratives of transition, illustrating internal boundary-making processes that are both affiliative and resistant.

The third topic (labelled "*Identity performativity and external validation*") presents a lexicon centered on terms such as *look, person, say, trans, go, know, try, gender, nonbinary, anyone*, and *tell*, creating a discursive field structured around visibility: users are concerned with how their bodies are read by others, which signals or behaviors make their gender legible, and how external gazes validate - or invalidate - their self-understanding. From a computational standpoint, the systematic co-occurrence of *look*,

gender, *nonbinary*, and *trans* indicates that the semantic structure of this topic gravitated around how one appears in relation to normative gender models and existing visual scripts for trans and non-conforming identities. Hermeneutic interpretation reinforces this reading. In this thematic cluster, the body emerges as a mediating interface between the self and the social world. Appearance is treated as a site where identity claims become exposed to judgement, and sometimes contestation. The presence of *person* and *tell* highlights that users position themselves in relation to how they are categorized by others, raising questions that intertwine existential concerns (“who am I?”) with social intelligibility (“how do others see me?”). A recurring theme across the corpus - signaled quantitatively by the association of *try* with *look* and *gender* - is the experimental nature of gender expression. Many posts describe gender as a practice of iterative experimentation: trying a new haircut, outfit, posture, or communicative style to assess how it will be socially perceived. This aligns with a performative act of gender as an embodied practice shaped through repetition, adjustment, and interaction. Netnographic exploration reveals a complex cyclical movement between online and offline experiences. Users imagine how others might react, test these expectations in physical spaces, and return to Reddit to recount the results, seeking community confirmation or advice. This circulation across experiential planes reveals how digital and embodied practices are mutually constitutive. The depth of this topic becomes particularly evident in threads where visual and verbal elements intersect. Sharing memes, selfies, or descriptions of outfits in r/NonBinary operates as a collective practice of renegotiation. The interactional structure of these threads shows that visual self-presentation is rarely evaluated as a merely aesthetic matter. When users ask for feedback on haircuts, outfits, or degrees of gender ambiguity, commenters frequently respond by validating the poster’s desired reading, suggesting small adjustments, or warning about the risks attached to visibility in offline spaces. These exchanges reveal a form of collective calibration, in which the community helps users recognize how their gender presentation may be read, while also affirming that no single visual script can exhaust non-binary identity. Accordingly, users articulate anticipation, vulnerability, and relief, showing how gender expression is lived as a series of micro-achievements. External validation often produces moments of euphoria. However, the corpus does not show only moments of affirmation, but it also contains narratives in which users discuss the consequences of being read, misread, or exposed in ways that make their gender presentation vulnerable to policing. Some posts refer to harmful offline encounters, but their analytical relevance lies in the way they are brought back into Reddit as shared material for recognizing the risks of visibility. In these threads, recounting violence, users collectively process what it means to appear in public, to be legible or illegible within binary gender regimes, and to decide how much visibility is safe or desirable.

In this sense, Reddit operates as a space where the dangers attached to gender performativity are narrated, and collectively managed. The data therefore do not allow to claim that symbolic or material violence occurs primarily within the subreddit community itself. Rather, they show how digital performativity is shaped by the anticipation, narration, and communal knowledge of hostility that may occur across online and offline settings. The “darker side” of digital performativity emerges from this

circulation: experiences of misrecognition and exclusion are transformed into shared cautionary knowledge, advice, emotional support, and strategies for navigating visibility.

4. Discussion

Within the specific context of highly visible posts from the selected Reddit communities, the findings suggest that non-binary subjectivity is discursively articulated through practices of introspection, recognition, and performativity. While Butler's (2015) notion of performativity has long informed analyses of gendered embodiment, the analysis shows that digital contexts introduce specific modalities of repetition, visibility, and negotiation that reshape the performative process. Rather than simply transferring offline identity work into virtual settings, Reddit provides a space in which performativity is distributed across multiple actors - users, communities, algorithms, and platform architectures - each contributing to the production and validation of gendered subjectivities. In the case of non-binary Reddit communities, this process assumes a specific form. Users use the platform to learn available vocabularies, test possible identifications, manage the risks of visibility, and receive feedback that may reshape subsequent offline practices. Reddit therefore illustrates how digital socialization and gender performativity are increasingly intertwined: platform-mediated interaction becomes part of the ordinary infrastructure through which users come to know, narrate, and inhabit gender.

The data also suggest that identity introspection on Reddit is relationally oriented. Many posts are written in anticipation of response: users ask for recognition, advice, comparison, or validation, thereby positioning the community as an imagined interlocutor. This confirms earlier observations that digital platforms generate "networked performances" of the self (boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015) yet extends them by showing how these performances can articulate non-normative identities that are often unintelligible, or even unsafe, in physical environments. Through posts that elaborate dysphoric feelings, seek relational confirmation, or test new forms of gender expression, users enact gender in ways that mobilize the platform's discursive affordances— anonymity, persistence, asynchronous temporality, and community-driven norms. These practices highlight a type of performativity that is not only iterative but also distributed. A single user's identity work is shaped through cycles that begin with embodied sensations and affective disturbances, travel through discursive elaboration in posts and comments, and return to the body via the emotional impact of recognition or misrecognition. The platform's affordances enable experimentation with pronouns, clothing, or self-presentation, while its community conventions regulate what counts as legible or affirmable (Dewdney & Ride, 2013). The circulation between online and offline spaces observed in the netnography suggests that non-binary performativity is not confined to either realm but emerges through a continuous trans-scalar movement between them. This dynamic illustrates how digital environments expand the performative apparatus, allowing non-binary subjectivities to crystallize in ways that exceed traditional frameworks of embodiment.

The findings also invite a more cautious knowledge of the risks associated with digital performativity. For non-binary users, being seen may produce gender euphoria when community feedback aligns with self-perception. At the same time, the data show how users narrate, anticipate, and collectively perceive the risks attached to visibility across online and offline contexts. Harmful offline encounters, such as being expelled from gendered spaces or verbally harassed in public, become part of the digital performative process when they are recounted on Reddit and transformed into shared knowledge about safety, legibility, and recognition.

Thus, the “darker side” of digital performativity identified in this study does not refer primarily to direct hostility within the subreddit community, but to the ambivalent circulation between digital self-presentation and broader cisnormative regimes of surveillance.

This tension confirms and extends scholarship on queer vulnerability (Rabins et al., 2025), showing that digitally mediated performativity operates simultaneously as a technique of empowerment and a site of exposure to symbolic or material violence.

The findings also contribute to debates on the diversity of non-binary subjectivities, showing a constellation of practices that respond to distinct positionalities, biographies, and socio-material conditions. Identity introspection, for instance, is shaped by personal histories of discomfort, cultural scripts, and diagnostic languages that vary widely across users. Recognition practices differ according to familial structures, social milieus, and linguistic environments. This complexity confirms the need for an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991), not as an additive model but as a framework for analyzing how multiple systems of power co-shape the possibilities of non-binary subjectivity. Reddit, in this context, emerges as a site of pluralization, where diverse ways of being non-binary circulate, collide, and recombine. Users encounter narratives that resist medicalization alongside those that embrace it; accounts that foreground bodily ambiguity alongside those that focus on linguistic or social aspects of gender; experiences of joy and empowerment alongside vulnerability and marginalization. This diversity illustrates that digital platforms can be considered as epistemic environments in which alternative gender knowledge is produced, contested, and legitimized (Fotopoulou, 2016b).

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how non-binary identities are articulated, negotiated, and made intelligible within Reddit communities, integrating computational topic modelling with hermeneutic and netnographic methods to illuminate the multilayered dynamics of gender construction in digital environments. Across the three topics identified - identity introspection, interpersonal recognition, and gender performativity - the findings reveal that non-binary subjectivities emerge as dynamic, relational, and continually negotiated practices. Digital platforms such as Reddit provide a crucial infrastructural environment within which these practices unfold, enabling forms of identity labor that may remain difficult or impossible to sustain in offline contexts shaped by rigid binary norms.

Three core insights can be distilled from the analysis. First, the study shows that non-binary identity construction is anchored in a form of *digitally mediated reflexivity*. Users turn to Reddit to articulate affective and bodily experiences that are difficult to express in mainstream cultural vocabularies. Through posts describing discomfort, uncertainty, or emerging self-understandings, individuals develop innovative frameworks to make sense of their feelings and situate them within broader cultural and diagnostic narratives. Identity introspection, therefore, is neither a purely internal process nor a solitary psychological act: it is shaped through dialogue with others, through the circulation of shared narratives, and through the discursive affordances of the platform, which encourage iterative self-examination. The data reveal that introspective practices are relational and situated, confirming that knowledge about one's gender is constructed through interactions with diverse actors. Digital environments thus can be viewed as laboratories where non-binary individuals test and refine self-understandings that challenge binary cultural grammar.

Second, the findings highlight the centrality of *interpersonal recognition* in sustaining gendered selfhood. Within Reddit communities, users share strategies for navigating pronouns, names, and everyday negotiations of visibility in family, school, workplace, or social contexts. These exchanges expose the micropolitics of non-binary recognition, revealing how emotional well-being is influenced by others' willingness - or refusal - to adopt linguistic practices that affirm gender identity.

Third, the study shows that non-binary identities are enacted through *performative practices of visibility* shaped by the interdependence of online and offline spaces. Users experiment with hairstyles, outfits, and communicative strategies to discover how their bodies and gestures are read by others. These experiments frequently involve cycles of anticipation, exposure, and community feedback: individuals imagine how they might be perceived, test this perception in physical spaces, and return to Reddit to discuss, adjust, or reinterpret the results. These dynamics underscore the ambivalent nature of visibility: the external gaze can validate identity when aligned with one's sense of self, yet can also expose individuals to violence, exclusion, or policing when their appearance challenges binary legibility. The community thus plays a crucial role in providing an "affirmative mirror," supporting forms of gender expression that challenge cisnormative regimes of visibility and providing alternative modes of recognition.

Taken together, the findings reveal that non-binary gender is shaped through recursive loops between digital and physical contexts, where identity is continually enacted, and renegotiated.

Several conceptual contributions emerge from this research. The findings invite a reframing of non-binarism not as a residual or intermediary position between male and female, but as a *relational practice* that reconfigures the boundaries of gender itself. Non-binary identities, as they appear in this corpus, are not reducible to static labels or stable categories: they emerge through situated practices that involve linguistic creativity, relational negotiation, and embodied experimentation. In this sense, non-binary subjectivities enact a form of gender that actively challenges and expands the normative frameworks governing intelligibility.

Moreover, the research advocates for a more pluralistic and intersectional analysis of non-binary identity. The heterogeneity of experiences observed across the corpus confirms that non-binary subjectivities cannot be captured through a single narrative or trajectory. Identity positions vary depending on cultural backgrounds, interpersonal relations, embodied histories, and degrees of access to supportive environments. Digital spaces amplify this plurality, enabling the coexistence of diverse gender knowledge that challenge dominant biomedical or institutional models. This pluralization underlines the need for theoretical models that are flexible enough to accommodate the multiplicity, fluidity, and context-specificity of non-binary experiences.

Methodologically, the research shows the value of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to study complex discursive fields. The LDA model, calibrated through coherence metrics and relevance parameters, revealed macro-structures of meaning that would be difficult to discern through qualitative methods alone. At the same time, computational modelling gains depth when complemented by interpretative and netnographic methods capable of capturing affective nuances, embodied dimensions, and relational dynamics. This integration is particularly fruitful for queer research, where identities, practices, and experiences often resist categorization and linearity (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019).

6. Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, the study presents several limitations. First, the dataset is limited to publicly accessible Reddit communities, which represent only a segment of non-binary experiences. Individuals who avoid digital platforms, who lack English-language proficiency, or who are marginalized within LGBTQ+ spaces may be underrepresented. Second, Reddit's demographic composition - skewed toward younger, Anglophone, and technologically literate users - may shape the types of narratives that circulate and the forms of identity work that are considered legitimate. Third, ethical constraints required the paraphrasing of posts and avoidance of identifiable data, which may limit the fidelity of quotations. Fourth, the LDA model, while useful for identifying patterns, inevitably imposes a structure on discourses that may not fully reflect the fluidity of lived

experiences. Computational reduction cannot capture the full richness of affective and embodied nuances present in the corpus. Another limitation concerns the sampling strategy. Since the corpus was based on top-ranked posts, the analysis privileges contributions that achieved higher visibility and positive community resonance. This design may underrepresent more marginal, less visible, or controversial forms of discourse, including posts with a more balanced distribution of upvotes and downvotes, posts that were removed or filtered through moderation, and posts authored by moderators. However, it should be noted that this is not just a sampling choice. Reddit's API does not allow for the collection of posts in the "controversial" category. These are posts that receive a high number of both upvotes and downvotes, indicating a heated debate within the community. RedditExtractoR does not support this category. As a result, the analysis is better suited to examining dominant and resonant community narratives than to mapping the full range of conflictual, peripheral, or moderator-driven dynamics within the selected subreddits. A further limitation concerns the multi-subreddit composition of the corpus. Although the selected subreddits all focus on non-binary identities, they differ in size, history, rules, moderation practices, and community orientation. The study does not run separate LDA models for each subreddit and therefore cannot fully determine the extent to which the three-topic structure reflects broader discursive patterns rather than subreddit-specific clustering. Finally, as with all netnographic work, researcher positionality may influence interpretative outcomes. Although reflexive strategies were employed, analysis are shaped by the researcher's own social location, theoretical commitments, and cultural frameworks.

Future research should pursue several directions. For instance, future studies could incorporate Reddit metadata, such as score, upvote ratio, number of comments, post age, moderator status, and removal status. This would make it possible to examine which topics receive greater visibility, which forms of discourse become more normatively resonant, and how controversial or less visible posts differ from top-ranked submissions. Such an approach would help clarify the relationship between platform metrics, community validation, and the stabilization of non-binary vocabularies online. In addition, future research could compare topic models across individual subreddits, testing the stability of topics across subcorpora, or limiting the analysis to a single subreddit in order to reduce community-level heterogeneity. Comparative studies across platforms - for instance, TikTok, Tumblr, or X - would also help to clarify how different affordances shape non-binary identity practices. Finally, further research should also examine how ethnicity, disability, class, and geographic location shape non-binary digital experiences, addressing the intersectional dimensions that surfaced implicitly in users' concerns about safety, recognition, and visibility.

From a methodological perspective, future studies could experiment with multimodal analysis, incorporating image-based computational tools to analyze selfies, memes, or visual repertoires, thereby extending insights into performativity. Longitudinal analyses tracking changes in discourse over time would also be focusing on understanding identity trajectories and the evolution of community norms. In addition, given the strong connection between online and offline experiences that emerged from the analysis, ethnographic work that integrates digital methods with face-to-face interviews could

deepen the interplay between physical and virtual contexts. Finally, future research should consider more in deep issues related to platform governance. The moderation policies, algorithmic ranking systems, and interface designs of digital platforms exert a profound influence on what forms of gender expression become visible, supported, or marginalized. Analyzing these infrastructures will be essential for theorizing how digital environments shape queer and non-binary futures.

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