

“It Is Hard to Believe You Are Real and Enough When the World Is Constantly Telling You That You Are Not”: Understanding Nonbinary Impostor Phenomenon

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This qualitative study explores nonbinary impostor phenomenon (NIP), a phenomenon in which nonbinary individuals experience self-doubt about the validity of their gender identity. This study aimed to evaluate how nonbinary individuals define NIP and identify factors that influence NIP. To address these aims, we used reflexive thematic analysis and an intersectional lens to analyze data from 24 nonbinary adults who participated in either an individual interview or a focus group. Results showed that participants characterized NIP as internalizing the belief that being nonbinary is not real or that one is not nonbinary enough. These beliefs were accompanied by feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and lack of belonging, indicating that NIP may be tied to worse mental health. Factors that contributed to NIP included binary normativity, nonbinary normativity, interpersonal invalidation, and misgendering. In contrast, factors that protected against NIP included community validation, interpersonal validation, and internalized validation. Identity development and concealment were also identified as individual factors that influenced NIP. Overall, these results underscore how NIP is a result of broader systems of normativity. Further research is needed on NIP and its mental health impacts.

KEYWORDS nonbinary; minority stress; impostor phenomenon; normativity; thematic analysis

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Visibility and awareness of nonbinary identities (i.e., gender identities outside of the male/female binary) have significantly increased over the past decade (Holland and Kahlor 2023). The Williams Institute recently found that approximately 1.2 million Americans identify as nonbinary (Wilson and Meyer 2021), with nonbinary people making up over one-third of the broader transgender population (James et al. 2016). However, with this increased visibility, there has also been a recent surge in anti-trans legislation in which hundreds of bills have been introduced over the past few years that aim to limit or ban gender-affirming medical care, participation of trans girls/women in sports, LGBTQI+ curriculum in schools, and drag performances in public (Peele 2023). These bills represent a larger cultural stigma towards trans and nonbinary (TNB) people and the prevalent attitudes that discount TNB identities as valid or acceptable (Paceley et al. 2023).¹ Nonbinary people in particular have their identities invalidated daily (Johnson et al. 2024; Matsuno et al. 2024a). Whereas trans men and trans women may have their identities invalidated when others question whether they are “truly men or women” or “truly trans,” nonbinary people contend with both questions about whether they are “truly nonbinary” and messages that nonbinary identities are not real or valid altogether (Johnson et al. 2020). As a result, nonbinary people may feel insecure and doubtful about the validity of their own nonbinary identity (Matsuno et al. 2024b). This qualitative study aims to explore these experiences by defining and describing the experience of nonbinary impostor phenomenon (NIP) as well as understanding the factors that influence NIP.

1 We use the acronym TNB to encompass all people whose gender differs from their sex assigned at birth and those who do not exclusively identify as a man or woman. We use TNB rather than transgender or trans as some nonbinary people do not identify with a trans gender modality.

IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON

The experience of impostor phenomenon or impostor “syndrome” is well documented in education literature. Impostor phenomenon is defined as when high-achieving people feel as though they are incapable or unintelligent despite their educational or career success (Bravata et al. 2019; Clance and Imes 1978).² Impostor phenomenon can be experienced by individuals in many different career domains (Barrow 2019; Fried-Buchalter 1992) and at various levels of achievement (Harvey 1981), regardless of an individual’s social identities (Chae et al. 1995; Clance et al. 1995). However, impostor phenomenon is more common in marginalized groups such as women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC; see Bravata et al. 2020; Mullangi and Jagsi 2019), and early definitions of impostor phenomenon codified marginalized identities such as being a woman as a core component of feeling like an impostor compared to peers (Clance and Imes 1978). Although most definitions of and research on impostor phenomenon focus on an individual’s achievements and success in areas like academics and career, some newer research suggests that individuals may experience impostor phenomenon related to other aspects of themselves, such as their identification with a group (Lahav et al. 2020). For example, one study found that some veterans report feeling like impostors when claiming their status as a veteran if they do not fit the cultural ideal of a “war hero” (Lahav et al. 2020).

There is not yet any published research that specifically focuses on nonbinary individuals’ experiences of impostor phenomenon or situates nonbinary individuals’ experiences of self-doubt within this framing. However, there are accounts within qualitative research in which nonbinary individuals describe feeling “not trans enough” or “not nonbinary enough” (Darwin, 2020; Garrison 2018; Matsuno et al. 2024a). Further online social media, blog posts, and anecdotal evidence suggest that nonbinary people sometimes describe their experiences of self-doubt around their gender identity as impostor phenomenon (Griswold 2019; Luna 2020). Given that most conceptualizations of gender are rooted in sex essentialism (i.e., the belief that sex determines gender) and binarism (i.e., the belief that only two genders exist; see Garrison 2018), nonbinary individuals may question the validity of their own gender (Johnson 2020). Further, nonbinary individuals contend with pervasive experiences of invalidation from others, in which others question the validity of their nonbinary identity or the validity of nonbinary identities altogether (Johnson 2020; Johnson et al. 2024; Matsuno et al. 2024a, 2024b; Rosati et al. 2025). This external invalidation may lead nonbinary individuals to be more vulnerable to questioning their own identity and struggling with feelings of self-doubt.

THEORIES OF NORMATIVITY

Theories of normativity provide a framework for understanding NIP and how NIP may develop. *Normativity* refers to the cultural messages and structures that suggest there is both a “normal” way of being as well as a “morally correct” way of being (Copp 2001;

2 We use the term impostor phenomenon rather than impostor syndrome in order to avoid insinuating that this experience is due to an individual’s pathology. However, this phenomenon in previous literature and colloquially is most commonly referred to as impostor syndrome.

Smith 2010). Heteronormativity was the first theory of normativity introduced as a concept by Michael Warner in 1991. Heteronormativity can generally be defined as the social pressure to be and act heterosexual that stems from overarching beliefs that it is normal and moral to be heterosexual and that it is abnormal and immoral to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. (Marchia and Sommer 2019). Theories of normativity have been applied to gender, with cisnormativity referring to the social pressure to be and act cisgender and societal beliefs that being cisgender is normal, expected, and preferred to being transgender (Worthen 2016). Matsuno and colleagues (2024b) describe a new concept labeled binary normativity, which describes cultural systems and structures that are set up to prioritize people with binary genders (e.g., gender markers, bathrooms), leading to the erasure of and stigma towards nonbinary people.

These systems of cisnormativity and binary normativity were created and perpetuated through colonialism. Several Indigenous cultures have traditionally celebrated genders outside the gender binary (Robinson 2019). However, Indigenous genders outside of the binary have been usurped by binary narratives of gender stemming from white, European cultures (Darwin 2020; McNabb 2017), and the history of nonbinary genders has largely been erased. Nonbinary individuals are denied historical models and perspectives with which to understand their nonbinary identity and can feel adrift when trying to navigate their gender (Jackson et al. 2022).

Transnormativity and Transgender Legitimacy

In addition to pressures from cisnormativity and binary normativity, TNB individuals face additional pressure in the form of transnormativity, the social pressure that stems from the belief that medically transitioning in a binary way is the “ideal” or “normal” way to be trans (Johnson 2016; Lindley and Budge 2023). Transnormativity is strongly connected to the history of gatekeeping gender affirming medical care, in which psychologists conducted lengthy evaluations to determine whether someone was “truly trans” and thus allowed to proceed with medical transition procedures (Marrow 2023). These evaluations required trans people to meet strict binary narratives of gender expression and report extreme and longstanding gender dysphoria (e.g., hating one’s genitalia) (Fraser et al. 2021; Vipond 2015). These institutionalized gatekeeping practices have since seeped into TNB communities, perpetuating a hierarchy of legitimacy that privileges and prioritizes those who meet the normative narrative of being trans (Johnson 2016; Sumerau and Mathers, 2019; Sutherland 2023). Further, transnormativity is situated within other oppressive structures such as racism, classism, ableism, sizeism, and so on. Therefore, the ideal notions of cis and trans “womanhood” and “manhood” are based on a combination of interlocking hierarchies with upper or middle class, white, able-bodied, thin, binary conforming trans people dominating social representation of transness (McIntyre 2018; Vipond 2015). TNB people enforce hierarchies of legitimacy through arguments about who “legitimately” falls under the TNB umbrella and questioning the authenticity of TNB people who fall outside of transnormative narratives (Darwin 2020; Shuster, 2017; Sumerau and Mathers, 2019).

Due to ongoing healthcare gatekeeping practices and gender policing within TNB communities, TNB individuals may internalize transnormative narratives, question the legitimacy of their own gender, and pressure themselves to “do transgender” correctly (Darwin, 2020; Fraser et al. 2021; Garrison 2018). Indeed, research on how

transnormativity impacts nonbinary individuals has found that nonbinary individuals can, at times, feel “abnormal” and “deviant” in their nonbinary identity, particularly when they do not match normative narratives such as the expectation of being binary and white (Nicolazzo 2016). Since nonbinary individuals who do not align with transnormative narratives, they report feeling as if they do not fit in with trans communities and feel as though they are not “trans enough” to claim membership of the trans label (Bradford and Syed 2019; Darwin 2020; Garrison 2018).

Nonbinary people may similarly feel social pressure to meet the dominant narrative of what it means to be nonbinary (Matsuno et al. 2024b). For example, one qualitative study found that nonbinary people reported self-doubts about whether they were “nonbinary enough” to identify as nonbinary, which the study describes as “self-invalidation” (Matsuno et al. 2024b). Participants described attributes of “looking nonbinary enough” as being “white, thin, able-bodied, trans masculine, assigned female at birth, young, and androgynous” (Matsuno et al. 2024b, 208). While it appears that nonbinary people contend with normative narratives of nonbinary legitimacy, research has yet to fully explore these narratives and how they impact nonbinary people.

CURRENT STUDY

The combination of cisnormative, binary normative, transnormative, and nonbinary normative pressures may lead nonbinary people to experience an impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity. The pervasiveness of invalidation that nonbinary people experience and the lack of access to nonbinary history and role models may make nonbinary people question or doubt the validity of their own identity. In sum, nonbinary individuals may be uniquely likely to experience an identity-based impostor phenomenon, but this phenomenon has not been explored in the research. Given the lack of conceptual clarity about what nonbinary impostor phenomenon (NIP) is, how it is experienced, and what contributes to it, qualitative research is the most appropriate method for defining and describing the experience of NIP. The current qualitative study aims to answer the following research questions: How do nonbinary individuals define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity? What factors influence nonbinary impostor phenomenon?

METHOD

Participants

Our sample included 24 nonbinary adults living in the United States of America. Table 1 provides participants’ self-chosen pseudonyms, pronouns, age, race, gender identities, and sexual identities. Participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 53, with an average age of 33 ($SD = 9.3$). Two-thirds of participants (67%) identified with at least one racial/ethnic minority identity, and the majority of participants were assigned female at birth (79%). Participants resided in 15 states in all regions of the US, with most reporting to live in an urban environment (54%), followed by suburban (33%), and a few living in rural areas (13%). In a check-all-that-apply format, participants described their gender as nonbinary (100%), trans (50%), genderqueer (42%), agender (21%), demi-girl (8%), demi-boy (4%), bigender (4%), trans woman (4%). No participants endorsed identify-

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity
afreketete	they/them/theirs	53	African American	Nonbinary Gender-Nonconforming	Queer
Ambiguity	they/them/theirs	35	white	Nonbinary	Bisexual
Arbor	they/them/theirs	28	white	Nonbinary, Agender	Pansexual
Aviva	they/them/theirs	27	Black	Nonbinary, Cute Boi	Lesbian, Demisexual
Billie	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers	33	African American	Transgender, Nonbinary	Queer
Cat	they/them/theirs	21	Asian	Nonbinary	Bisexual
Cosmic	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers, he/him/his, depends on context	32	Black	Agender, Nonbinary	Queer
Dorian	they/them/theirs	29	white, Ashkenazi	Genderqueer, Trans Masc	Queer
EJ	she/her/hers	21	Black American	Nonbinary	Straight
Enby	depends on context	38	Multiracial	Enby	Queer, Omnisexual
evening	they/them/theirs	30	white	Nonbinary Transfemme	Pansexual, Queer, Mostly t4t
Geoffrey	they/them/theirs, depends on context	27	Multiracial (Chinese, Jamaican, White)	Nonbinary, sometimes as a Gay Man (but Not as a Man Singularly)	Queer, Gay, Bi/Pan
Jae	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers	43	white	Agender, Genderqueer, Nonbinary	Bisexual, Pansexual
Jane	they/them/theirs	25	Chinese	Nonbinary	Pansexual
Kayla	they/them/theirs	23	Mexican-Filipino, Latinx/Latine, Asian	Genderqueer, Nonbinary	Queer
Lint	they/them/theirs	25	Peruvian	Nonbinary, Qariwarmi	Bisexual, Queer
MayBoo	they/them/theirs, depends on context	41	Colombian, Chibcha	Nonbinary	Queer, Lesbian, Bisexual, Pan
Mayhem	they/them/theirs	37	Asian	Nonbinary	Queer
Mickey	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers, depends on context	53	white, Celtic	Nonbinary	Straightish, Queer
Milka	they/them/theirs	29	white	Nonbinary	Queer
Quinn	they/them/theirs	37	Black	Nonbinary, Genderqueer, Agender	Queer, Pansexual
R	they/them/theirs, he/him/his, depends on context	27	South Asian	Nonbinary, Transmasculine	Queer
Stella	they/them/theirs	29	Native American (Creek)	Nonbinary	Pansexual
Tam	they/them/theirs, he/him/his, no pronouns	49	white	Nonbinary	Pansexual, Most Attracted Primarily to Characteristics often Labeled as Femme

ing as cisgender or Two-Spirit. The majority of participants used they/them pronouns (92%), and 38% used multiple pronouns or changed pronouns depending on the context. The majority of participants had a Bachelor's degree or higher (79%) and were employed full-time (63%) or part-time (20%). Half of respondents reported household annual income was less than \$50,000 (50%), 38% between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and 13% reported an annual income of over \$100,000.

Procedure

All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Palo Alto University. Participants were eligible for the study if they identified under the nonbinary umbrella, were at least 18 years old, and lived in the US. Participants were recruited through social media advertisements on Facebook and Instagram, email listservs, and snowball sampling methods in June and November 2021. Participants initially completed a brief (5 min) online demographic survey and then were invited to either an individual interview or a focus group based on their preference. To obtain as diverse a sample as possible, we used purposeful sampling methods (Patton 2002) to invite participants from a variety of demographic backgrounds in terms of race, age, gender expression, geographic environment, etc. We prioritized inviting demographic groups that are often underrepresented in nonbinary samples, such as participants older than 40, BIPOC, those assigned male at birth, and those from rural areas. Further, we reviewed the open-ended responses on the screening survey to check for possible bots or fraudulent responders (e.g., identical written responses across surveys) and checked for demographic consistency (e.g., IP address and reported location match). There were no notable instances of bots/fraud. Initially, 154 individuals completed the initial demographic/screener survey, 35 individuals were invited to a focus group or interview, and 25 completed a focus group or interview. One participant was removed from our sample due to providing minimal responses during the focus group (e.g., "I agree"), and therefore, we did not have enough data to include them in our data analysis. There were no other instances of suspected fraudulent responders within the focus groups or interviews, as each participant gave detailed descriptions of their experiences of NIP. The research team decided to conclude data collection when data saturation was reached, or no new information was attained through interviews (Fusch and Ness 2015). Detailed notes were taken after each focus group and interview, with information about common patterns in the data. The research team had regular meetings during the data collection process to discuss initial themes from the data and to determine whether saturation had been reached.

We completed eight individual interviews and three focus groups to capture both the breadth and depth of nonbinary people's experience with impostor phenomenon. Focus groups provide an opportunity to obtain many diverse perspectives and allows participants to build upon one another's responses. We felt that focus groups may also be a validating experience for focus group members. However, we also felt that an interview format offered substantial benefits, such as the opportunity to ask multiple follow-up questions and an environment in which participants may be more open to sharing vulnerable experiences. We decided to offer both formats to attend to participants' preferences for sharing in a group or individual

setting. Combining focus group and interview data has been argued to maximize knowledge about the phenomenon being studied (Capielo Rosario et al. 2020; Purcell et al. 2016).

Each co-author facilitated one or two interviews and one or two focus groups. One focus group and all eight interviews were conducted via video on Zoom. Participants were also permitted to use the chat function during focus groups, and these responses were integrated with audio transcripts for data analysis. Audio transcription was produced through the Zoom software and then audited for errors (e.g., incorrect or missing words) and de-identified. The other two focus groups were conducted via synchronous text chats on Zoom. We chose to utilize text-based focus groups to reach participants who may have high levels of nonbinary impostor phenomenon and thus be less likely to participate in a video-based focus group with other nonbinary participants. Text-based focus groups have been recommended to help reach stigmatized populations by increasing anonymity (Abrams et al. 2015) and have been used with TNB populations who may prefer text-based formats due to experiencing increased gender dysphoria in video-based Zoom discussions (Matsuno et al. 2024b).

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured format with pre-existing questions, as well as the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and reorder questions as necessary. During data collection and recruitment, we used the term nonbinary impostor syndrome as we felt this would be the most recognizable term, and therefore, our interview questions used this terminology. We asked participants to describe their experiences of NIP, factors that influenced their feelings of NIP, and experiences of community connection and belonging. See the Appendix for the full list of focus group and interview questions. In both video and text-based focus groups, interactions between participants were encouraged. Participants in text-based focus groups interacted with each other by using the ^ symbol to indicate agreement with the previous statement and the @ symbol to address a specific focus group member. In both focus groups, participants often addressed one another and validated each other's experiences. Focus groups took 2 hours to complete, and participants received \$25 compensation. Interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes, and participants received \$10 compensation. We analyzed all questions asked during the interviews and focus groups, and the current manuscript is the only planned manuscript using this dataset.

Reflexivity Statement

Our authorship team is diverse in terms of age, race, ethnicity, immigration status, neurodivergence, socioeconomic status, gender identity, gender expression, sexual identity, and professional role. Four out of five authors identify under the nonbinary umbrella, and all authors identify under the LGBTQI+ umbrella. Two of the five authors identify as people of color, both from Asian backgrounds. The researchers' professional roles at the time of data collection and analysis consisted of two doctoral students, one postdoctoral fellow, one assistant professor, and one full professor.

Our team actively and intentionally reflected on our positionality (i.e., socio-cultural identities, power and privilege, and lived experiences) throughout the data collection and analysis process. For example, we debriefed with each other after each focus group and wrote memos throughout the entire data collection and analysis pro-

cess to track our immediate reactions and reflections. We also had group discussions throughout the data analysis process about our own experiences of NIP and what factors influenced NIP for each of us personally (e.g., intersectional identities, identity development, etc.). These discussions helped us critically reflect on our interpretations of the data, such as whether we overemphasized themes we personally related to. We attended to privilege and power within our team (e.g., cisgender vs. nonbinary, professor vs. student) and strived to ensure that those with less power felt their input was equally valued (Lazard and McAvoy 2020).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis Approach

We utilized reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019), which emphasizes the continual reflection and questioning of the researchers' assumptions and how they inform data interpretations. In this approach, researcher subjectivity is understood as a resource rather than a potential threat to finding an "objective truth" (Braun and Clarke 2019). We believe that research cannot be truly "objective," and we did not aim to "remove our biases" when analyzing the data. Rather, we aimed to be reflexive in identifying the potential gaps in our perspectives. We used both inductive and deductive approaches in our data analysis. We began with an inductive approach (bottom-up) by employing open coding. Once we reached the theme-generating stage of analysis, we all agreed that theories of normativity (e.g., Copp 2001; Johnson 2016; Smith 2010) seemed to be a helpful guiding framework in organizing our themes. We also recognized that we gravitated towards organizing our themes based on ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner 1994), such as recognizing influences on NIP from a broader societal level, an interpersonal level, and an individual level. Therefore, we used a deductive approach to refine and organize our themes. We also aimed to analyze the data using an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1991; Moradi and Grzanka, 2017) by taking into account how intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, ableism, sizeism, etc., influenced normativity, which in turn influenced NIP.

We followed the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019): familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. The first four authors met regularly to create, define, and revise codes in an iterative process of coding, revising the codebook, and re-coding each transcript. We then grouped conceptually similar codes to generate overarching themes while using theories of normativity as a guiding framework. These themes were then reapplied to the transcripts to further evaluate the conceptual clarity of each theme. The fifth author served as an auditor and reviewed the transcripts, codebooks, and themes, and provided feedback on three occasions at different stages of analysis. The auditor provided useful feedback, which helped with the clarity and accuracy of the code and theme definitions.

RESULTS

We organized our thematic analysis according to our two research questions: "How do nonbinary people define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity?" and "What factors influence NIP?" Participant quotes have been cleaned with

unnecessary words and grammatical errors removed for readability. Theme definitions and examples are presented in Table 2.

Research Question 1. How do participants define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity?

Nonbinary Impostor Phenomenon

Participants described impostor phenomenon as holding or struggling with two belief systems: 1. that being nonbinary is not real, and 2. they are not nonbinary enough. These beliefs were often accompanied by feelings of self-doubt and insecurity and by questioning the authenticity and legitimacy of one's experiences and identity. When describing the first belief system, that being nonbinary is not real, participants brought up examples of a variety of cognitions, such as wondering if they were "crazy" or "insane" when trying to explain their nonbinary gender to others. For example, Amiguity shared,

A lot of people have no idea what a nonbinary person is, and they are only really familiar with the gender binary. So I've been trying to explain to them that I am nonbinary or what it is. They're just like, that's not a thing... I know this is a thing, but all these other people don't, so like, am I the crazy one? I don't know.

Several participants similarly reported questioning themselves and ruminating on whether nonbinary identities are valid. Geoffrey reported questioning the validity of their gender identity "every 45 minutes." They described having the thoughts, "Am I nonbinary? On good days, I know that for myself, and on most other days, I don't." Several other participants regularly revisited thoughts that nonbinary gender may not be real, particularly when having to assert their nonbinary gender in a cisnormative society.

Among our sample, it appeared that the second belief system was more common, as almost every participant described NIP as wondering about the validity of their own nonbinary identity, often phrased as questions of whether they were "nonbinary enough." Dorian stated, "I think nonbinary people often feel that we are not 'nonbinary enough' unless we fit into a very narrow archetype of what the media portrays as androgynous, which is almost always white, young, very thin, non-disabled and masc/alternative presenting." Even participants who more easily refuted the belief that nonbinary identities are not real had lingering worries that they were somehow "not nonbinary enough." Some discussed worrying about how other trans or nonbinary people would view their gender. For example, Tam said, "There's a constant wondering if I'm not trans enough or if I'm not nonbinary enough to be part of the club." These quotes demonstrate that there is an underlying narrative about who is "nonbinary enough" and that this narrative is perpetuated within trans and nonbinary communities to determine and enforce group membership.

Beyond the belief systems that make up NIP, participants reported feelings associated with these beliefs, including self-doubt, insecurity, and lack of belonging. The feeling of self-doubt was one of the core defining feelings connected to NIP. Billie stated, "Sometimes that can kind of make me feel like, 'Well, you know you're just a fake, you're just phony, because you're trying to rebel' or something like that." Others like Jane similarly mentioned that "with this constant lack of basic respect and acknowl-

edgment as an individual, you may begin to feel fake and question yourself.” Lack of belonging was another feeling connected to NIP that came up. For example, Mickey shared, “I haven’t actually had a chance to really spend any time in any nonbinary communities... I find myself hesitating feeling like, do I really belong there?” Feeling like an impostor made participants question whether they belonged to nonbinary communities, and a lack of belonging appeared to increase NIP.

Research Question 2. What factors influence nonbinary impostor phenomenon? *Contributing Factors*

Participants received messages that reinforced the notion of the gender binary or messages about what the “right” way of being nonbinary was on a broader societal level, such as through social media, and on an interpersonal level, such as comments made by others. Using theories of normativity as a lens for understanding the messages participants received, we generated four subthemes to describe factors that contributed to the experience of NIP: *binary normativity*, *nonbinary normativity*, *interpersonal invalidation*, and *misgendering*.

Binary normativity

Many participants noted that most systems and structures are set up under the assumption that everyone exists within the gender binary, such as gendered bathrooms or gendered uniforms, etc. Jane stated, “When society/societies invalidate our identity, it makes us feel uneasy and unwelcome for just... being. For existing. Who could feel real when YOU know you’re right, but everyone else says you’re wrong?” In a similar vein, Dorian summarized, “Put simply, it is hard to believe you are real and enough when the world is constantly telling you that you are not.”

Many participants noted how the gender binary was assumed in most contexts and that there was a general sense that others did not believe that nonbinary gender identities existed, even if not said by others directly. For example, Tam said, “People don’t recognize that there is anything outside of the binary, basically. If I have to explain it, you can see the look on their face, like, ‘What is that? That doesn’t sound like a thing.’” Tam’s statement demonstrates an underlying social pressure felt by most participants to conform to the gender binary. Even among people who acknowledged the validity of trans identities broadly, there seemed to be a pressure to identify as either a trans woman or a trans man. “Are you a pink trans or a blue trans? No one has directly asked me that, but I feel it in how people respond,” evening. Participants were constantly absorbing binary normative messages, whether directly or indirectly, which contributed to feelings of NIP.

Additionally, many participants noted that they had little exposure to nonbinary people in media, which made it difficult to have an understanding of and confidence in their own nonbinary identity. Tam described thinking, “Well, what even is non-binary? Let alone what I’m supposed to be, look like, act like, talk like, etc.” Participants noted that not only did the lack of nonbinary people in media contribute to NIP, but some media explicitly denied the validity of nonbinary genders. Dorian explained,

There is also active antagonism towards trans and especially nonbinary people in a lot of media and political discourse, e.g., “I sexually identify as an attack helicopter,” and stuff like that. So sometimes it isn’t just the

Table 2. Study Themes, Definitions, and Examples

Research Question 1. How do nonbinary people define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity?	
Themes	Examples
<p>Definitions</p> <p>NIP can be defined as when a nonbinary individual internalizes aspects of one or both of two systems of belief:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That being nonbinary is not real 2. That being nonbinary is real, but that one is not nonbinary enough <p>These belief systems are typically accompanied by feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, and lack of belonging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking that one is a fraud or fake as a nonbinary person • Thinking that one's nonbinary identity is less valid than others • Feeling self-doubt and/or insecure about one's nonbinary gender • Feeling a lack of belonging among other nonbinary people
Research Question 2. What factors influence nonbinary impostor phenomenon?	
Themes/Subthemes	Definitions
Contributing Factors	Factors that were reported to increase NIP
<i>Binary Normativity</i>	Cultural norms, messages, structures that convey that having a binary gender is expected, normal, and preferred
<i>Nonbinary Normativity</i>	Cultural norms and messages that convey that there is one singular normative way to be nonbinary
<i>Interpersonal Invalidation</i>	Behaviors or statements made by others that convey either 1. that being nonbinary is not real, or 2. that being nonbinary is real, but that one is not nonbinary enough
<i>Misgendering</i>	When others use names/pronouns or gendered language that do not affirm the person's gender
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies that enforce the gender binary, such as binary dress codes • Social pressure to fit within the gender binary • Lack of nonbinary representation in media • Dominant representations of nonbinary people as young, white, thin, androgynous, and trans masc • Social pressure to align with dominant portrayals of nonbinary people • Cisgender/heterosexual people denying that nonbinary is a valid identity • LGBTQI+ people gatekeeping who is "nonbinary enough" • Being referred to as a man or woman • Being misgendered after making intentional effort to be gendered correctly

Themes/Subthemes	Definitions	Examples
Protective Factors	Factors that were reported to decrease NIP	
<i>Community Validation</i>	Community environments and messages that convey either 1. that being nonbinary is real, or 2. that there are many valid ways to be nonbinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse representations of nonbinary people usually online or on social media • Being part of a community (nonbinary, trans, or LGBTQ+) that validates nonbinary people who do not fit the normative narrative
<i>Interpersonal Validation</i>	Behaviors or statements made by others that convey either 1. that being nonbinary is real, or 2. that there are many valid ways to be nonbinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receiving social support related to one's nonbinary identity • Having one's gender affirmed by having others use the correct pronouns or gendered language
<i>Internalized Validation</i>	Believing that one's nonbinary identity is real, valid, and enough, and rejecting binary and nonbinary normativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing self-confidence, self-acceptance, and pride • Believing that there is no "right" way to be nonbinary • Living in a way that is authentic to one's gender
Individual Factors	Individual factors that influenced nonbinary people's impostor phenomenon	
<i>Identity Development</i>	Stage of identity development of their nonbinary identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The recency of identifying as nonbinary
<i>Concealment</i>	Level of identity concealment of their nonbinary identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not being "out" at work, among family, etc.

absence of validation and representation, it is also active cultural denial of our existence.

Dorian's example shows how media often portrays nonbinary identities as a joke and perpetuates the notion that they are made up and not valid. It was also common for participants to not know other nonbinary people personally, which also made it difficult for participants to have confidence in the validity of their nonbinary identity. R stated, "Also, I've never met another nonbinary person of my own ethnicity anywhere except online. Not seeing anyone like me be out as nonbinary, including myself, makes me feel like I don't exist sometimes." Binary normativity came both in the form of a lack of nonbinary representation as well as more direct messages that nonbinary identities were not valid.

Nonbinary normativity

In addition to experiencing binary normativity, participants described receiving messages about the "right" or "valid" way to be nonbinary. The theme of nonbinary normativity was pervasive across almost all participants. Several participants discussed not seeing themselves represented in nonbinary media, which led them to question the validity of their own identity or have feelings of not being "nonbinary enough." Kayla spoke to the impact of nonbinary normativity,

When I was kind of coming to terms with my own identity about ten years ago, the only nonbinary representation I had seen was basically androgynous, white, skinny people, and, as somebody who grew up in a very traditionally Catholic Mexican house, only seeing white people as this model for nonbinary definitely kept me from being able to claim that nonbinary identity for myself for so many years.

Kayla's quote illustrates how nonbinary normativity, especially the stereotypical depiction of nonbinary people as white, prevented them from being able to claim their nonbinary identity.

Several other participants shared a similar view that the dominant narrative of what it meant to be nonbinary was associated with being young, androgynous, white, and thin. Stella commented on how only seeing representation of young nonbinary people increased their sense of NIP,

The majority of nonbinary people I see are like through TikTok or on Facebook. And even then, a lot of those people are significantly younger than me. You know so it's just difficult to feel included in that space. Like, I don't think I've ever seen anyone in their 50s who is nonbinary, you know what I mean? It almost feels like this is something that you're supposed to grow out of.

Other aspects of the nonbinary normative narrative were that nonbinary people must have gender dysphoria related to their bodies and use they/them pronouns. Participants discussed feeling social pressure from others to conform to these stereotypes in order to be viewed as "nonbinary enough." For example, Billie shared, "I think for a while I did kind of feel like, well, if I'm nonbinary, does that mean I have to use they/them?" Enby shared the social pressures of needing to have gender dysphoria to be trans or nonbinary, "Even as I navigated questioning my gender, I was told I couldn't be trans or nonbinary because I didn't feel dysphoric. So that made me question if I was

really nonbinary or not.” Others discussed how these social pressures to be “nonbinary enough” led them to question and doubt their own choices related to transition steps. Jae stated, “I have a very large chest, and I happen to like that about myself... I know some people like to have top surgery or wear binders and things, and that was never an issue for me. But sometimes I feel like someone might look at me and say like well, you don’t look nonbinary.” Participants were keenly aware of the dominant messages about what it meant to be “nonbinary enough,” either by receiving social pressure from others or through social media depictions of nonbinary people and narratives, which led to NIP.

Another important aspect of nonbinary normativity was that it was sometimes perpetrated by other LGBTI+ people, which appeared to carry a significant influence on NIP. R shared, “Even within the LGBTQ community, there’s an expectation for nonbinary people to be 100% neutral/androgynous in all aspects.” Dorian explained how nonbinary normative expectations are reinforced within nonbinary communities,

I also see a lot of reinforcement of stereotypes in many nonbinary spaces and communities. It looks like the people who fulfill the stereotypes getting the most praise and attention, and “passing” and affirmation advice tending to center whiteness and thin/muscular/medically transitioned bodies.

Dorian’s quote shows how nonbinary normativity may be perpetuated in more subtle ways by rewarding and centering those who meet the nonbinary normative narrative. There appeared to be the notion of a hierarchy within the nonbinary community of who was deemed the most “valid” versus who was seen as less valid. Cat further demonstrated this experience,

It almost feels like - because I do not fit a certain structure of what it means to be nonbinary or queer, I’m automatically just not considered a part of it. It’s not overt, but almost like the way things function and how people interact and the narratives that have shaped queer culture that has - that kind of affects how welcome or unwelcome I feel in the queer community in general.

Due to nonbinary normativity being perpetrated within LGBTQI+ communities, some participants, such as Cat above, described being unsure about whether they belonged in these communities. Arbor explained, “I definitely experience feelings of not being ‘queer enough’ for the community, and would fear being seen as a gate crasher somewhat, so that gives me pause as well.” Nonbinary normativity was a pervasive underlying pressure that was felt by almost every participant and was experienced broadly and within LGBTQI+ communities specifically.

Interpersonal Invalidation

In addition to experiencing the often subtle, but constant binary normative and nonbinary normativity messages, many participants recalled instances of experiencing explicit invalidation from others. Mika discussed how invalidation from others impacted their feelings of NIP and pressure to conform to the nonbinary normative narrative,

There are people that have said, like nonbinary people don’t exist to me or why do they have to make up terms like nonbinary blah blah blah.

Which I think then pressures me to present in a way that is more clearly nonbinary to show, like, no, this does exist.

Others, too, expressed experiencing direct invalidation when asserting their nonbinary identity. EJ said, “People always have a way of telling nonbinary people that their gender is fake, which is difficult to deal with.” Mickey discussed how other people tried to convince them that they were actually a woman instead of nonbinary.

[Others] comparing me to very sporty cis women or you know tomboys or all of those sorts, and they say ‘they’re women, see, you’re a woman too! You know, just because you like to do these things doesn’t mean you’re not a woman.

Similar to nonbinary normativity, participants noted specific instances when other LGBTQI+ people made statements that invalidated their nonbinary identity. For example, Enby shared, “I’ve had a lot of toxic experiences with the greater trans community...It’s very much a ‘you’re not one of us,’ and I don’t get it. Because I thought that trans folks might understand the struggle a little more.” afrekete expressed how they felt that this often occurred in white queer spaces, “I feel like in the white queer community, I know that in like those spaces, there’s a lot of like well ‘you’re not really trans.” Cosmic explained, “I’ve seen people invalidate nonbinary people because of their own imposter syndrome or because they feel it threatens their own gender.” Cosmic’s quote shows how some trans or nonbinary people may invalidate others in order to justify the validity of their own identity. Quinn stated, “I’m definitely aware that there are trans people that wouldn’t accept me, and that hurts because I’ve got nothing but love for them,” demonstrating how invalidation from those within the LGBTQI+ community was particularly painful.

Misgendering

Although misgendering had a similar impact as interpersonal invalidation, as it made participants question the validity of their nonbinary identity, it appeared to be a distinct experience. Misgendering was often unintentional, but nevertheless, it represented the underlying binary normative and nonbinary normative views of others, whereas interpersonal invalidation was more explicit and intentional. Participants noted that the consistency of being misgendered led to NIP. “I think that nonbinary people experience imposter syndrome related to their nonbinary identity when a nonbinary person is constantly misgendered,” Lint. Many participants described the frustration of almost never being seen as their true gender and how this made them question whether their identity was “enough.” For example, Arbor said, “I also get ‘sir’d’ a lot by strangers, like baristas or the checkout clerk. It makes me feel like I’m not doing enough. Has even happened when wearing my pronoun pin.” Arbor’s quote shows how constant misgendering can lead to internal questioning about one’s own identity. Misgendering was often a painful experience. Jane described that it “cuts like a knife.” While misgendering didn’t typically directly invalidate the existence of nonbinary identities or the validity of a person’s nonbinary identity, it indirectly left the impression that the person’s nonbinary identity was not real, which was then internalized, leading to NIP.

Protective Factors

Validation emerged as the overarching critical factor for protecting against NIP. Participants described experiencing validation of their nonbinary identity in different contexts and socioecological levels. Therefore, we identified three subthemes: *community validation*, *interpersonal validation*, and *internalized validation*.

Community Validation

Participants discussed how community-level validation was important to affirm that being nonbinary is real and can be uniquely expressed. Community validation included seeing diverse representations of nonbinary people and being a part of a community that affirms nonbinary people, especially those who do not fit the normative narrative. Participants described how online groups helped increase the visibility of the various ways to be nonbinary, thereby helping participants accept themselves more. Quinn illustrated the importance of an online community when they said,

Thankfully, because I'm in a lot of Facebook groups where people are constantly affirming others who ask if they're nonbinary enough, I've built up confidence and combat those thoughts with "you ARE enough" when it happens. Without those groups, I'd be more lost because I don't know any nonbinary people in real life.

As Quinn described, having a space to connect with other nonbinary people about shared experiences of doubting their identity seemed to help participants develop more confidence in their nonbinary identity. Furthermore, Aviva said, "It's the camaraderie of like making fun of the things that like make us sad most of the time... sometimes nonbinary trans people can feel very alone in their experiences, and I feel like memes are a quick way to just be like you're not alone, I have that shared experience." Aviva's quote depicts how online support can help nonbinary people feel less alone, which may also protect against NIP.

Community validation most often stemmed from LGBTQI+ communities or nonbinary communities. Ambiguity said, "The queer people that I have around me are really awesome and really affirming, and I've never had any sort of pressure from them, like maybe you should do this instead." In this example, the LGBTQI+ community provided Ambiguity a safe space in which they did not have to conform to pressures to fit a nonbinary normative mold, which encouraged them to express their gender more authentically. Mayhem (also described how connection to non-cis communities helped them feel less isolated, "I've had the fortune of building spaces, where it's predominantly non-cis...for me, these spaces are a lifeline to sanity, they are a lifeline to feeling less isolated." Participants also found that connection to nonbinary people who share similar racial and ethnic identities was beneficial to protect against NIP, as shown in Mayboo's quote, "I feel obviously the most comfortable in my community ... a lot of my friends are also nonbinary within my Latinx community."

Interpersonal Validation

Validation within interpersonal relationships was also important to protect participants from NIP experiences. For instance, participants benefited from having social support systems that celebrated their nonbinary identity. Billie said,

My friends were the first people that I told about being nonbinary, and they were immediately like this is great and the next question somebody asked was, are we changing pronouns? Is there anything that we're doing now that you would like us to stop doing or that would make you feel uncomfortable? And that like meant absolutely everything to me.

In this example, Billie experienced meaningful validation from having their friends eager to support her gender journey. afrekete shared, "My family is very accepting like my parents never had a moment where they didn't accept me. And so I think that that has allowed me to go out in the world ... to feel okay on some deep level." Through having familial support, afrekete was able to develop self-assurance that may have helped protect them from internalizing invalidating messages.

Participants also shared how it was validating to have their gender affirmed by having the correct pronouns or gendered language used by others. For example, Stella said, "In that inner circle where my pronouns and stuff are respected, it does just feel a lot safer." Furthermore, participants named how validating it was when the people in their lives did not expect them to conform to binary gender roles. Aviva said, "I'm in a relationship where gender binary roles, like who does what, doesn't exist, and it's great because I then don't have to feel like I need to learn this feminine thing in order to satisfy whatever thing you want me to do." In this quote, Aviva illustrates how a lack of gendered expectations in their relationship enabled them to more freely be themselves.

Internalized Validation

Participants were able to affirm for themselves that their nonbinary identity was real, valid, and enough. In doing so, participants could also reject binary and nonbinary normativity. Internalized validation helped participants foster self-confidence, self-acceptance, and pride. Jae expressed,

I gotta say the imposter syndrome is waning. Which is a good thing. I feel more confident because I decided at the heart of all of this, I just am who I am at the end of the day, I'm me and it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.

Additionally, participants were able to challenge others' opinions and expectations of their gender expression as a nonbinary person. For example, Enby shared, "The whole point of being queer was to be unapologetically ourselves and liberated from expectation and permission."

Internalized validation also enabled participants to embrace the belief that there are many ways to be nonbinary and allowed them to feel freer to authentically express themselves. For example, Billie said,

What I've been trying to do is kind of tell myself all this is fluid anyway, and I can feel one way today and feel one way tomorrow, and so, if I decided this is what I want to do today, I don't have to do that tomorrow, and that's okay.

Billie's refusal to put themselves in a binary normative box allowed them to accept and celebrate their gender fluidity.

Individual Factors

A couple of the factors related to the individual were reported to influence experiences of NIP but could not be easily categorized into contributing factors or protective factors. We identified two subthemes that describe additional factors that influence NIP: *identity development and concealment*.

Identity Development

Many participants reported that their arc of identity development influenced their level of NIP. For example, Jae said,

In the beginning, I was very hesitant to call myself nonbinary out loud at all. Because I didn't have the language for it before and once, I heard the language I didn't really reflect on how it relates to me so much ... it was kind of more gradual of a realization ... so I get that imposter syndrome feeling like I'm old and I worry that [other nonbinary people] are thinking well you just found out now.

There appeared to be a pattern in which participants experienced more NIP earlier on in their identity development, which was also exacerbated if they began identifying as nonbinary at an older age. Some participants, in turn, reported experiencing less NIP after a longer time identifying as nonbinary, like how afrekete mentioned, "I used to [experience impostor syndrome], but then you get over 50 and don't actually give a fuck anymore. It's not like being 20 where you care what everyone thinks and so then I'm just like I want to do it, so I do it." Similarly, Mayboo shared, "I feel a little bit like I'm growing into myself more and I don't necessarily feel imposter-y" showing how, over time, NIP tended to wane. These quotes indicate that the length of time identifying as nonbinary as well as one's own identity development process are often correlated with NIP.

Concealment

Another complicated factor that influenced NIP was the participants' level of concealment/outness and visibility/invisibility as a nonbinary person. Some participants reported experiencing more NIP when concealing aspects of their identity. R shared, "As a POC, I have to constantly weigh whether or not it's worth it to come out to members of my own ethnic community since many of them are still quite conservative. So, I never get to affirm myself to others in my community and have to be okay with being misgendered." In this quote, R grapples with feeling the need to conceal their nonbinary identity to protect themselves, while also experiencing more NIP due to being misgendered more often. Furthermore, some participants spoke about how not being perceived by others as nonbinary increased their experiences of NIP. For example, Stella shared how they struggled with this.

The sort of straight passing persona, the she/her feels like, it's a different person, it's a character, it's a role that I'm playing. And I don't know it's kind of hard to break out of that sometimes ... it's just I very rarely feel genuine ... And then I have to have that internal conflict with myself, Oh well, am I just trying to be difficult?

Stella speaks to how their NIP was exacerbated by their invisibility as a nonbinary person and concealment of their true gender identity, which made them feel less

genuine. Similarly, Quinn discussed being perceived as a trans man by their co-workers rather than nonbinary. They shared, “How I was perceived in the clothes made me question my nonbinary identity a little,” demonstrating how their invisibility as a nonbinary person contributed to their feelings of NIP.

DISCUSSION

This study provides evidence that NIP is experienced by nonbinary people and should be studied further. Through our study, we generated a community-based definition of NIP that centers the voices of nonbinary people. NIP appeared to be the internalization of normative narratives about whether nonbinary identities are real and valid and what type of nonbinary person is real and valid. The internalization of these normative narratives led to self-questioning and self-doubt about the validity of one’s membership to a nonbinary identity and nonbinary communities. Nonbinary participants struggled internally to prove to themselves and others the validity of their group membership. Further NIP may also lead nonbinary individuals to question whether they belong in nonbinary communities, which may negatively impact their connection with other nonbinary people and feelings of community connectedness.

Additionally, our study investigated influences on NIP and showed how both binary normativity and nonbinary normativity contributed to NIP. Binary normativity and nonbinary normativity are similar yet distinct constructs from cisnormativity and transnormativity and have been underexplored in research (Matsuno et al. 2024b). Our study shows that at least one impact of these normative belief systems is increased feelings of NIP. It could be argued that NIP reflects the internalization of binary normative and nonbinary normative beliefs and could be a unique form of internalized stigma. Further, it appeared that binary normativity and nonbinary normativity not only directly contributed to NIP but also promoted invalidation and misgendering on an interpersonal level, which, in turn, also contributed to feelings of NIP. Future quantitative research is needed to confirm these relationships and gain a better understanding of the effects of binary and nonbinary normativity on NIP and other outcomes among nonbinary people.

Additionally, our results highlighted the intersectional nature of systems of normativity, as the nonbinary “norm” was defined as having several other dominant identities, such as being white, non-disabled, thin, and transmasculine. Therefore, nonbinary people with other marginalized identities do not fit the “norm” and, therefore, may be more vulnerable to experiencing higher levels of invalidation and subsequent NIP. Similar to research on transnormativity (Johnson, 2016; Sumerau and Mathers, 2019), nonbinary normativity was often perpetuated within LGBTQI+ communities through the inclusion and centering of those who meet the norm while excluding and invalidating those who do not. For example, several BIPOC participants reported experiencing invalidation from their white nonbinary peers or felt that white nonbinary people were the “gatekeepers” of who was “nonbinary enough.” These experiences align with past literature on intersectional microaggressions, which describe the unique negative effects of intra-community microaggressions (e.g., LGBTQI+ BIPOC experiencing racism within LGBTQI+ communities) (Cyrus 2017; Huynh et al. 2024). Intra-community microaggressions can lead to increased identity conflict within LGBTQI+ BIPOC,

in which they feel like their racial identity, sexual identity, and gender identity conflict with each other (Sarno et al. 2015). Therefore, nonbinary normativity may have a negative impact on community connectedness and identity development, especially among nonbinary people who are outside of the normative narrative (e.g., BIPOC, transfeminine, disabled, older, etc.).

Our results support previous research that indicates that invalidation and misgendering are prevalent stressors experienced by nonbinary people on a daily basis (Johnson et al. 2020; Matsuno et al. 2024b). Previous research found that invalidation mediated the association between nonbinary gender identity and poor mental health while controlling for other minority stressors and sociodemographic factors (Johnson et al. 2024), indicating that invalidation has a significant negative impact on mental health for nonbinary people. Additionally, misgendering has also been shown to be associated with psychological distress (Jacobsen et al. 2024; Matsuno et al. 2024a; McLemore 2018). Our study shows that these stressors also enhance NIP. It is possible that invalidation and misgendering harm mental health through NIP; however, quantitative research is needed to test this hypothesis.

Finally, our study highlights the importance of validation as a protective factor at a community, interpersonal, and intrapersonal level. Gender validation may be a similar but distinct construct from gender affirmation or support, and should be studied further for conceptual clarity. We defined validation as not only believing and accepting nonbinary people's identities but also as promoting belief systems that oppose normative narratives about gender and instead validate all types of gender narratives. At a community level, gender validation included having diverse representations of nonbinary people and explicit validation of nonbinary people outside of the normative narrative. Several participants noted that having role models outside of the norm and seeing a diverse array of experiences among nonbinary people provided a validating environment that lessened their feelings of NIP. Several past studies have shown the positive effects of social support on mental health among TNB people (e.g., Budge et al. 2013). However, our study further highlights that having others specifically validate one's nonbinary identity helped combat NIP. Finally, resisting normative messages and instead internalizing validating messages about their gender led to reduced NIP and increased feelings of self-confidence.

Limitations

Although we used purposeful sampling to intentionally obtain a diverse sample in regard to race, assigned sex, and age, our sample was still missing representation from some demographic groups, such as those from rural areas and with lower educational backgrounds. Further, we did not collect demographic information on disability status and size, which may have been important social identities that influenced NIP, as many participants noted that being non-disabled and thin were characteristics of the nonbinary "norm." Half of our sample identified as trans in addition to nonbinary, and a few discussed their feelings of impostor phenomenon in regard to taking on the label of being trans. However, given that previous research has explored nonbinary individuals' feelings of self-doubt in regards to identifying as trans (e.g., Darwin 2020; Garrison 2018), and our research questions were geared towards understanding NIP specifically, we did not analyze these quotes. Finally, our results may be influenced by the

interview questions posed, and therefore, there may be other influences on NIP that are not captured in our results. For example, the interviews included more questions about what factors contributed to NIP and fewer questions about what decreased NIP, and therefore, our themes may not fully represent the full breadth of factors that can protect against NIP.

Future Research

NIP was characterized by feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and lack of belonging, indicating that NIP may be tied to worse mental health; however, more research is needed to confirm how NIP is related to various mental health outcomes. In order to further understand whether NIP is predicted of worse mental health in quantitative research, it would first be important to create a measure of NIP. This measure could capture both dimensions of this construct identified in the current study: (1) the belief that one's nonbinary identity is not real, and (2) the belief that one is not nonbinary enough. Experiences shared by the participants in this study can be used to help develop measure items that are aligned with community experiences. Having a valid and reliable measure of NIP would advance research by identifying the mental health impacts of NIP as well as whether NIP limits resilience factors such as community connectedness or gender identity pride. Further, participants discussed that NIP prevented them from engaging in nonbinary communities or broader LGBTQI+ communities. Therefore, NIP may indirectly negatively impact mental health by decreasing engagement with supportive resources.

Further, future research could identify predictors and moderators of NIP to confirm whether the contributing factors identified in this study are generalizable. Finally, given that invalidation and misgendering have been shown to predict psychological distress, it would be helpful to test whether NIP mediated this relationship. Answering these questions quantitatively can help establish appropriate targets for interventions that aim to decrease health disparities and increase positive mental health outcomes among nonbinary people.

Implications

Work, school, and healthcare settings would benefit from training about nonbinary identities and experiences to create more equitable and less harmful environments for nonbinary individuals. It would be especially important for training to cover key topics such as binary normativity (e.g., cultural systems that prioritize binary genders, such as bathrooms for men and women only), trans and nonbinary normativity (e.g., social messages about the “ideal or normal” way to be trans or nonbinary), interpersonal invalidation (e.g., questioning the validity of nonbinary identities), and misgendering (e.g., using the wrong name or pronouns). Providing this type of education can decrease these stigmatizing experiences that nonbinary people face in almost every environment in their day-to-day lives and, in turn, lessen the health disparities they experience. Further, combating binary normative beliefs about gender can benefit women and men as well by allowing for more freedom to express themselves authentically. Training should also encourage various systems to make structural or systemic changes to combat binary normativity, such as creating gender-inclusive restrooms and using gender-neutral language on forms (e.g., use they instead of he/she). Mental

health providers can explore how normativity is impacting their nonbinary clients and help clients find community validation, as well as support them in rejecting normative beliefs and internalizing more validating beliefs.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored the phenomenon of nonbinary impostor phenomenon, which appears to be a unique stressor commonly faced by nonbinary people. We used qualitative interviews to generate a community-based definition of NIP, defined as internalizing the beliefs that 1. Being nonbinary is not real, and 2. One is not nonbinary enough. These beliefs were associated with feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and lack of belonging. NIP stemmed from systems of normativity, invalidation, and misgendering in which nonbinary people have their identities questioned and erased on a daily basis. Experiencing gender validation and messages that validate a wide variety of nonbinary experiences appeared to combat NIP. More research is needed on the psychological impacts of NIP and ways to combat normative systems and reduce NIP.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. To start, can you share your pseudonym and pronouns if comfortable, and answer this icebreaker question: If your gender was a color, what color would it be?
2. Impostor syndrome is an internal experience of “phoniness,” or feeling as though one does not deserve their position or status based on their abilities, accomplishments, and characteristics. In what ways do you think that nonbinary people experience impostor syndrome related to their nonbinary identity?
 - a. Impostor syndrome is often talked about as it relates to work and school, how do you feel about this terminology being used to describe feeling like an impostor as a nonbinary person?
 - b. Have you seen it used among LGBTQ+ people and nonbinary people in particular?
3. In what ways has impostor syndrome influenced the gender identity labels you use?
 - a. How does this vary in different situations or with different people?
4. Do you ever feel like you are “not nonbinary enough”?
 - a. Can you give any examples of situations or times you felt this way?
 - b. How do you feel like your other identities play into these situations?
 - c. Do you ever question whether you are actually nonbinary?
 - d. Can you give any examples of situations or times you felt this way, and why?
5. Are there ever times when you feel pressured to conform to a stereotypical depiction of being nonbinary?
 - a. Can you give examples of times this has happened?
 - b. Can you give examples of what you feel pressured to change?
6. What have cisgender/heterosexual people said or done that add to the pressure to conform to a stereotypical depiction of being nonbinary?
 - a. What have cisgender/heterosexual people said or done that implies you are “not nonbinary enough”?
7. What have trans/nonbinary/cis sexual minority people said or done that add to the pressure to conform to a stereotypical depiction of being nonbinary?
 - a. What have trans/nonbinary/cis sexual minority people said or done that implies you are “not nonbinary enough”?
8. How does it impact you when you get messages about “not being nonbinary enough” from trans, nonbinary, or cisgender sexual minority people? Can you give examples?
 - a. How is the impact different from when you get these messages from cisgender heterosexual people?
9. How well connected do you feel to nonbinary communities? What are some things that make you feel connected or disconnected?
 - a. Where do you find nonbinary communities?
 - b. Who do you find in nonbinary communities?
 - c. Do you feel that there are certain intersecting identities/characteristics that you find most often in nonbinary communities? If so, what identities?
10. Today we’ve discussed imposter syndrome, which includes feelings such as you “don’t really belong,” “aren’t really nonbinary,” or are unwelcome in communities.” After our discussion today, how do you conceptualize/understand “nonbinary imposter syndrome?”