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The power of connection: Resource and responsibility in the virtual community experience of Italian trans and gender-diverse activists

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Abstract

The community concept underwent a series of adaptations and integrations throughout the decades. One of these transitions was supported by the rise of virtual communities, especially social network sites (SNSs). These platforms are recognized to serve as spaces for marginalized groups like transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals to create safe and inclusive communities for self-expression and activism. To investigate how TGD activists engage with SNS, 21 activists were interviewed, exploring challenges, potentials and perceptions. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed that participants perceive SNS in line with the community experience framework, viewing them as resources for accessing information, providing support and fostering belonging and investment, and as acts of responsibility aimed at nurturing reciprocity, sense of duty and social justice advocacy. However, SNS also proved to expose activists to vulnerability within the TGD community itself, where a hierarchy that marginalizes TGD identities with transnormative experiences is often reproduced. Additionally, SNS anonymity offers a safer environment for TGD individuals to come out but protects hate speech perpetrators. Thus, while pivotal in TGD activism and community building, the dual nature of SNS underscores the complexities of

virtual spaces. Finally, the study calls for redefining the concept of community beyond the virtual–physical dichotomy.

KEYWORDS

sense of community, sense of community responsibility, social justice, social network sites, transgender activists

1 | INTRODUCTION

The psychological sense of community (PSOC) was defined by Sarason in the 1970s as "the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them [and] the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (Sarason, 1974, p. 157). According to the community experience framework (Boyd & Nowell, 2017), individuals perceive their community experience through two independent yet related facets: resource and responsibility. The former is related to the PSOC, which encompasses four interdependent dimensions: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The latter facet is connected to a sense of personal responsibility for protecting or enhancing the individual and collective well-being of a community of people (SOC-R) that is not related to an expectation of personal gain (Boyd & Nowell, 2017). According to Rochira et al. (2022), PSOC and SOC-R reflect the affective and normative sides of belonging, and both can push protective behaviours for well-being, as well as prosocial ones (Compare et al., 2021).

The PSOC construct has long been associated with geographical locations (e.g., neighbourhoods, towns and cities; Prezza, Zampatti, Pacilli, & Paoliello, 2008) or physical contexts (e.g., schools and community organizations; Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007). However, the emergence of the Internet and its subsequent systems of mediated communication, which transcend geographical proximity, has challenged the PSOC construct and necessitated the analysis of the different complexities and nuances that define a community (Rotman & Wu, 2015). The Internet has witnessed various forms of virtual communities emerge atop evolving technical infrastructure—including newsgroups, blogs, knowledge repositories, question-and-answer forums and social network sites (SNSs), all of which have been identified as virtual communities (Mamonov, Koufaris, & Benbunan-Fich, 2016). Over time, virtual communities, especially through SNS (e.g., Facebook, X and Instagram), initiated a hybridization of offline and online spaces, providing access to ubiquitous local community experiences (Gatti & Procentese, 2022) and enabling engagement in international social movements (e.g., Fridays for Future; Terren & Soler-i-Martí, 2021). This process was significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted the way the public lives, communicates and learns, thereby fostering the proliferation of virtual communities at faster rates (Zhao & Shi, 2022).

Studies conducted with virtual communities have examined the characteristics of a sense of virtual community, comparing and contrasting them with the more traditional PSOC, which was originally anchored to local communities. Results have shown that the sense of virtual community has a positive impact on social and moral support (Daffern, Balmer, & Brereton, 2021), reciprocal trust (Blanchard, Welbourne, & Boughton, 2011), increased satisfaction and social interaction (Chai & Kim, 2012) and sustained civic engagement (Compare & Albanesi, 2022). These findings suggest that, although different from face-to-face communities, members of virtual communities still experience a PSOC similar to that found in local communities (Zhao & Shi, 2022). Although the SOC-R experience in virtual communities remains relatively unexplored, we can speculate that it serves as a significant driver of engagement and community involvement, particularly in contexts aligned with personal values. Mannarini et al. (2021) empirically demonstrated that values underpin the sense of responsibility towards the community, shedding light on their role in shaping normative environments within local communities. Building upon their findings, we anticipate that

coherence and affirmation of values are pivotal aspects of community experience, especially among activists, even within virtual environments.

1.1 | Being active in the virtual space

The connection between belonging and participating has been largely endorsed and confirmed in multifarious studies, especially in the community psychology field (Talò, Mannarini, & Rochira, 2014). Virtual communities do not represent an exception. Despite online activism being initially dismissed as slacktivism, which is supposedly effort-free and unproductive, it has currently established as a legitimate form of active participation (Greijdanus et al., 2020). SNSs facilitate online activism by (a) providing individuals with a space to share personal experiences and opinions, linking them to broader social causes (e.g., #metoo movements); (b) enabling members to offer support, coordinate activities and respond to criticism, like in "digilantism," where norm violations, such as heterosexism or misogyny, are exposed and publicly condemned, fostering awareness and activism within these virtual communities; and (c) allowing individuals to engage beyond their immediate virtual circles, collectively shaping and disseminating new narratives, like the women's #freethenipple movement, which seeks to normalize non-sexualized representations of breasts and reclaim female autonomy over their bodies (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

SNS, such as TikTok or Instagram, offer unique opportunities for learning and advocacy movements, fostering self-expression and social activism, especially for younger generations (Alexandro, Hariatama, & Uda, 2022). A virtual space with these characteristics attracts members and leaders who are often marginalized in the physical societies they inhabit and who utilize virtual platforms to create new communities they could not form in offline space (Noveck et al., 2021).

1.2 | Navigating the queer virtual space

Despite the cultural shift regarding gender and sexual diversity, living openly as a LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual/aromantic) person still challenges master narratives of gender modality and sexuality (Barsigian, Howard, Quintero Davalos, Walsh, & Manago, 2023).

In several European countries, stereotypes and prejudices against LGBTQIA+ people remain prevalent (European Commission, 2019; Salvati, De Cristofaro, Fasoli, Paolini, & Zotti, 2020). These biases are often reinforced by a structural lack of protections for the LGBTQIA+ community in many nations. For example, in Italy, where this research was conducted, efforts to pass laws against homophobic and transphobic discrimination have consistently failed (Rucco, Toffoli, Anzani, & Prunas, 2024). As a result, LGBTQIA+ individuals in Italy continue to face significant vulnerabilities, with the country ranking among the lowest in Europe for human rights protections (ILGA-Europe, 2024). The local social and cultural contexts in Italy often fail to fulfil essential individual needs, such as socializing, forming romantic relationships and engaging in social interactions, which leads to increased loneliness among LGBTQIA+ people (Procentese & Gatti, 2019). In response, LGBTQIA+ communities have increasingly turned to the Internet and mobile applications to meet new people and build relationships (Procentese & Gatti, 2020). Moreover, during periods marked by challenges to their rights or the rise of conservative right-wing governments, online spaces serve dual roles for the LGBTQIA+ community; they represent avenues for coping strategies (Gonzalez, Pulice-Farrow, & Abreu, 2022) and amplify social protests (Florio, 2021). Thus, virtual spaces represent valuable dimensions for identity development, affirmation and self-presentation in the LGBTQIA+ communities (Manago & McKenzie, 2022).

Existing research shows that SNSs serve as viable spaces for community building and knowledge sharing among gender and sexually minoritized people, sustaining both individual and collective self-esteem (Bond & Miller, 2024; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023). Moreover, these platforms offer safe spaces to disclose sexual orientations and

gender modalities while receiving and providing guidance, support and affirmation (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023). Moreover, SNSs present an opportunity, especially for queer youth, to counteract LGBTQIA+ negative or stereotypical depictions and corrosive narratives within virtual spaces (McInroy, Zapcic, & Beer, 2022) while bringing intersectional social justice values into the discourse (Lopez-Leon & Casanova, 2023; Schmitz, Coley, Thomas, & Ramirez, 2022).

However, not all virtual spaces are safe spaces. For example, gender and sexually marginalized university students may navigate the complexities of being out at university while closeted at home, adopting protective strategies to manage this tension (Talbot, Talbot, Roe, & Briggs, 2022). Some social network platforms, like Facebook, while supporting identity exploration, can limit online performances due to context collapse–virtual communities that integrate family and friend systems (Talbot et al., 2022). Moreover, SNSs expose members to the risk of LGBTQIA+-oriented hate speech, leading to harmful psychological effects ranging from anger to severe depression and self-harm, particularly affecting trans and gender-diverse (TGD) individuals (Ștefăniță & Buf, 2021). Therefore, specific attention should be directed towards this vulnerable population rather than comprehensive reflections on LGBTQIA+ virtual communities as a whole (Ștefăniță & Buf, 2021).

1.3 | TGD SNS experiences

The rise of the TGD[1] virtual communities in the 2000s, particularly on platforms like YouTube, has facilitated the sharing of personal stories and experiences, as well as advocacy efforts for justice (Miller, 2017). These online narratives serve multiple purposes, including education, raising awareness and providing support to individuals navigating their gender identities and transitions while combatting stereotypes and promoting understanding within broader society (Miller, 2017). New narratives are also essential to cope with proximal and distal stressors deriving from the offline contexts and prevent negative consequences related to the minority stress—or rather to social decompensation (see Riggs & Treharne, 2017).

TGD individuals are often neglected by policymakers. In Italy, for instance, the law regulating the gender affirming pathway does not allow legal recognition of nonbinary genders. It only recognizes and legitimizes the medicalized experiences of men and women, effectively reducing health professionals to gatekeepers who must provide a diagnosis before TGD clients can begin their pathway (Lorusso et al., 2024; Lorusso, Compare, & Albanesi, 2023). Moreover, institutional policies supporting TGD students and recognizing their identities are almost non-existent, making coming out in school settings potentially dangerous (Bourelly, 2023). Inclusive education for LGBTQIA+ individuals in schools is often weaponized by conservative religious and right wing factions under the guise of opposing "gender ideology" or "gender theory." These groups justify restricting or denying rights for LGBTQIA+ individuals by claiming to uphold moral order and counter perceived moral threats (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017). Broader conspiratorial narratives alleging an LGBTQIA+ agenda to propagate homosexuality among minors and disrupt societal norms, framed within the context of "gender theory," further bolster these arguments (Salvati, Pellegrini, De Cristofaro, & Giacomantonio, 2024). Such discourse is commonly reprised in Italian political debates, impeding the passage of protective legislation that has been shown to positively impact the well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals and provide broader societal benefits (Fields & Wotipka, 2020). As a result, negative public perceptions of anti-discrimination policies and civil rights advancements are intentionally perpetuated (Salvati, Pellegrini, De Cristofaro, Costacurta, & Giacomantonio, 2024).

As a result, SNSs have become instrumental in connecting TGD individuals, aiding in identity development and providing access to information on gender affirmation pathways (Buss, Le, & Haimson, 2022). This is particularly true for younger TGD members, especially students, who use SNS to find space for their identity, engage in self-education (Cepa-Rodríguez & Martxueta, 2024) and connect with other TGD people (Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2019). Virtual communities serve as resilience and community-building spaces, where viewers actively engage to gain and give resources, strengthening community ties (Rothbaum, Etengoff, & Uribe, 2022).

Unfortunately, TGD folks can experience violence and harassment also in virtual communities, which can easily become unsafe spaces due to the intentional exploitation by malicious groups that take advantage of the same tools that afford safety for TDG individuals, like search engines, SNS, discussion forums, hashtags, to infiltrate and cause harm (Scheuerman, Branham, & Hamidi, 2018).

Despite these interesting findings, much of the research on SNS experiences of TGD individuals has been conducted outside Italy and without an explicit reference to the community experience framework or its dimensions. Indeed, studies have primarily framed belonging as a resource for specific psychological needs, such as recognition and protection and less attention, has been given to other psychological needs, like achievement, which are typically associated with the PSOC experience. Furthermore, the SOC-R dimension has been largely overlooked in examining SNS experiences.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore how TGD experiences virtual communities, especially SNS, clarifying challenges, potentials and perceptions by applying Boyd and Nowell's (2017) community experience framework. To achieve this aim, a group of Italian TGD folk was invited to share their narratives, personal experiences in their affirmation pathway and activism and the role played by SNS in their lives. Two explorative research questions guided the study:

RQ1. How do Italian TGD activists perceive SNS as a resource in their lived experience?

RQ2. How do Italian TGD activists experience the SNS in terms of responsibility?

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Positionality statement

As highly educated, white, Italian scholars, we acknowledge the influence of the intersection of our identities on our positionality, which has a direct impact on the lenses with which we approach data collection and analysis. Being advocates and activists for social justice, along with being gender and sexually minoritized people or cisheterosexual LGBTQIA+ allies, moved us to conceptualize this research as a platform to amplify participants' voices while making both theoretical and empirical contributions to maintaining a reflection on queer issues within academia and the community psychology field.

2.2 | Procedures

To recruit participants, public posts on SNS were created outlining the study's objectives and inclusion criteria and subsequently through a participant-driven mechanism (i.e., snowball sampling). The call was part of a larger research assessment on TGD activism in Italy, encompassing different areas of activists' lives and impacts, such as the gender-affirming pathway, school experiences, family relationships and their active engagement (see also Lorusso et al., 2023; Lorusso, Compare, Cecconi, & Albanesi, 2024). To participate, individuals had to meet specific criteria, including being 18 or older, self-identifying as TGD and actively engaging in advocacy or activism. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and conducted online via Zoom in Italian from June to November 2021. Each interview approximately lasted 95 min. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Bologna Ethics Committee (Protocol number 201,357, dated 26 August 2021), and participants expressed their informed consent through signed agreements.

In the larger study, a grounded theory approach was employed, approaching data inductively and moving back and forth iteratively (Charmaz, 2014). Initial interviews were collected, and the authors began reading and taking

notes, continuing recruitment until data saturation was achieved—with 25 participants, as suggested by the approach (Charmaz, 2014). Participants were committed to activism in various ways, such as engaging in online activism through their personal SNS profiles ($n = 14$; 56%) and participating in activism with queer, transfeminist and LGBTQIA+ collectives and associations, as well as student and university organizations active both in local areas and in online informational campaigns and content dissemination ($n = 13$; 52%). Additionally, participants defined their daily actions addressing issues relevant to the TGD community as forms of activism ($n = 18$; 72%). These forms of activism were not mutually exclusive for the participants. A subsample of 21 participants detailed perspectives on the relevance of virtual communities, especially SNS, for their identity exploration and activism. Therefore, their interviews were selected for this study.

2.3 | Instrument

The study adopted a qualitative semi-structured interview to investigate participants' experiences within SNS. The interview guideline included collecting socio-demographic information during the conversation and questions that delved into the narratives of participants' identity experiences. It explored how they affirmed their identity socially, legally and medically; their relationships with friends, family and professionals; and the dynamics of their activism. This included a detailed description of their actions, their affiliation with organizations/collectives or their status as independent activists, as well as the context of their activism. In Table 1, we have included the interview areas with their respective sample questions.

2.4 | Participants

A group of 21 participants were included in this study. The majority were white (90.5%, $n = 19$), with one African Italian and one multiracial participant. Their ages ranged from 18 to 34 years ($M_{age} = 24.10$; $SD = 5.12$). Regarding their employment status, 47.6% ($n = 10$) were students, 38.1% ($n = 8$) were employed and 14.3% ($n = 3$) were

TABLE 1 Interview sections and sample questions.

Interview section	Sample questions
Gender identity and affirmation	How do you define your gender identity? Have you come out or affirmed your gender identity in any areas of your life? [prompt: families, friends, social network site...]
Gender-affirming pathway	Are you interested in starting a medicalized path? Have you legally changed your gender and name? How did you access information regarding the gender-affirming pathway? [prompt: friends, collectives/organizations you belong, online blog/vlog...]
Relationship with professionals	How would you describe the relationship with the professionals you have met in your medicalized gender-affirming pathway?
Activism	How did you start activism on issues related to trans issues? Are you part of a structured organization/collective? Which setting and spaces do you approach as an activist? [prompt: community contexts, educational contexts, social network sites...] What does your activism focus on? [prompt: informative and education content; depathologization issues...] How has the relationship with other trans people helped you in your experience and in relation to your gender affirmation journey? What is most rewarding for you about your activism?

unemployed. The majority (57.1%; $n = 12$) had a high school diploma, 33.3% ($n = 7$) had a higher education degree and 9.5% ($n = 2$) had a middle school diploma. In terms of gender modality, 42.9% ($n = 9$) identified as nonbinary, 38.1% ($n = 8$) as trans men, 9.5% ($n = 2$) as trans women and 9.5% ($n = 2$) as gender questioning. The majority (71.4%, $n = 15$) were openly TGD individuals in all the contexts they live, while 28.6% ($n = 6$) were out only in specific contexts.

2.5 | Data analysis

The data used in this study are a subset of a larger corpus, meticulously selected to include excerpts pertaining to participants' experiences and active engagement in SNS. Due to the quantity and complexity of SNS-related data, we opted to allocate sufficient space for thorough reflection rather than flattening or disregarding participants' contributions and insights. The selection process was conducted by the first author and was twofold. Initially, keywords related to virtual spaces (e.g., online, Internet, SNS—Facebook, Instagram and TikTok) were automatically searched in the entire corpus (i.e., verbatim transcriptions of interviews). Subsequently, the remaining corpus was carefully examined, and additional excerpts were manually selected. To do this, all transcripts were re-read to identify any sections where participants might have implicitly referred to virtual spaces without explicitly naming them. This involved looking for descriptions of activities, interactions or experiences that typically occur in online environments, such as references to digital communication or SNS interactions. Specific attention was paid to contextual clues, language patterns and indirect mentions that suggested an online context.

Upon completing this phase, the resulting corpus underwent analysis using NVivo13, employing an inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Joy, Braun, & Clarke, 2023). The first author approached the coding phase in an open and organic manner to identify relevant and recurring topics, resulting in nine initial codes. These codes were then shared and discussed with the research team, leading to a series of reflexive meetings, suggestions and revisions that confirmed the initial coding structure. To organize these codes into categories of shared meanings, two themes were defined. These themes reference the community experience framework, adopting the sense of community resource dimension and the responsibility dimension as labels. Quotations extracted from the interviews underwent a process of translation and back-translation and are presented in the results section in their English adaptations.

3 | RESULTS

As a result of the reflexive thematic analysis process, two distinct themes were identified, each representing a fundamental aspect of the community experience of TGD people within SNS. Each theme encapsulates nuanced and essential elements of participants' community experiences within SNS, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their engagement. The themes are articulated as presented in Table 2. Quotes presented in the following paragraphs contain abbreviations of participants' fictional names, age and gender modality.

3.1 | Resource

Participants identified different ways in which SNS communities can represent a resource. Having access to an almost unlimited source of information (*accessing information*) for reflection and *identity exploration* provides opportunities to integrate and fulfil the needs of recognition and acceptance. *Providing support* and *exchanging resources* exemplify the nuanced nature of influence in fostering community cohesion. Disclosing lived experiences in safe environments underpins processes of *self-recognition* and *authenticity exploration*, enabling shared emotional connection.

TABLE 2 Themes description and codes' articulation.

Theme	Description	Code
Resource	This theme includes references to participants recognizing SNS communities as resources for accessing information, providing support and fostering a strong sense of belonging and investment.	1. Accessing information 2. Identity exploration 3. Exchanging resources 4. Providing support 5. Validation and self-recognition 6. Authenticity exploration
Responsibility	This theme highlights participants recognizing SNS communities as a responsibility; involving nurturing reciprocity, a sense of duty towards the community and younger generations; and taking action through education and advocacy for social justice.	7. Giving back 8. Changing contexts through education 9. Affirming social justice and universalistic values

Overall, participants expressed a strong sense of belonging and investment in their virtual communities, actively engaging in resource creation and support provision.

3.1.1 | Accessing information

The first way is providing access to information, a valuable resource aiding self-recognition but also pathways to gender affirmation, thus contributing to fulfil the needs that most participants have experienced as urgent and pivotal for their well-being.

Participants referred to how SNS can facilitate accessing information, especially compared to the early 2000s. Having a source to refer to is pivotal in sustaining and guiding individuals in recognizing and understanding their TGD identities. SNSs are platforms where to find embodied experiences that can resonate with individual experiences, aiding self-recognition and finding words to express feelings.

According to participants' experience, various platforms can serve the scope—Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube, sharing a plethora of information, ranging from scientific definitions and messages of self-acceptation to TGD gender affirmation pathway vlogs, and relatives talking about emotional, legal and medical steps. Vlogs were identified as a valuable source of information regarding what the gender affirmation pathway entails in term of emotional, physical and social changes. Accessing and integrating information from various sources are key for gaining awareness and understanding what does and does not fit in the personal experience.

> While I was learning about the final stages of transition, I watched this YouTube video by an FTM guy talking about his journey, and it made me realize that wasn't my experience. I wasn't entirely feeling like a girl, but I wasn't identifying as a boy either, so I needed more clarity. I ended up finding answers through a lot of research, mostly looking at English articles because there weren't many resources in Italian about this. (p., nonbinary, 19)

Accessibility of contents as well as the ubiquitous nature of SNS was problematized by our participants. In fact, the online content regarding TGD experiences was for a long time, and majorly remains, only available in English, making it harder for those with lower language proficiency to access foreign experiences and integrate different perspectives.

3.1.2 | Identity exploration

Another need that is satisfied through SNS is identity exploration. Participants engage in identity exploration in SNS and remarked that virtual communities serve as environments where individuals can question their identity and experiment first coming out attempts, by using different pronouns or labels that define gender modalities. These trials are made possible by the fact that virtual spaces are often perceived as safer than physical ones. Anonymity is powerful in granting the possibility to make "any kind of experiments" and expose you at your own pace.

> Questioning my gender identity, I felt the best approach was to join Facebook groups. I didn't feel comfortable discussing it openly with people I knew, as I'm a bit shy about sharing personal details. So, I joined these groups, which led to me gradually coming out and engaging in discussions and posts to understand things better. (g., nonbinary, 22)

SNSs are not exempt from sanctions or negative repercussions, still they are less impactful, also because they are tempered by the community as a whole:

> In places like work or social events, where I might face danger or transphobia in person, I usually avoid those situations, to be honest. But on social media, it's a whole different story. You really get to see the power of the community and what it can achieve because the support we give each other is incredibly strong—it's truly empowering. (w., trans man, 31)

Access to information and identity exploration represents common needs of TGD community members, where the virtual community could be seen as merely instrumental. Each member could potentially utilize the resources of the community passively, without making significant contributions, like opportunistic behaviour—this phenomenon is referred to as the free rider effect (Hager, Hensel, Hermle, & Roth, 2023). However, the reality in SNS is different, at least according to the experiences of the activists that we have approached, because they actively search for and find different ways to contribute actively to resource production and exchange.

3.1.3 | Exchanging resources

According to participants' experience, SNSs have the potential to be dynamic arenas for addressing TGD-related matters and involving community members in collective resource-sharing by exchanging resources.

On SNS, exchanges can happen via direct messages, in one-to-one interactions or more forum-looking settings like groups. Participants shared their willingness to positively influence their community by making resources available, together with accessing them.

This comprises information as well as financial support. One example is represented by the crowdfunding initiatives organized by TGD members that aim covering other members' gender affirmation pathway.

> Pooling resources, I frequently donate to individuals on GoFundMe, especially for procedures like mastectomy, because I find it admirable that the community supports its members, even financially. (l., nonbinary, 20)

Participants stressed the need to differentiate genuine initiatives, targeting positive influence, from virtue signalling operations that aim to reach consensus, popularity and followers across SNS platforms.

> Activism, in my view, extends to everyday life. It's meaningful even if someone defines themselves as an activist for simply replying to a post on Instagram. However, I've observed that some people engage in activism merely for show or because it's trendy. Unfortunately, being LGBTQ-friendly has become fashionable, almost like a marketing tactic for visibility. (q., woman, 21)

Participants engage in resource-sharing, contributing to and being influenced by the collective dynamics. Exchanging material resources highlight the reciprocal nature of influence in fostering community cohesion, which is further reinforced by providing support.

3.1.4 | Providing support

Participants express a clear intent to create new narratives, spaces and a legacy for newer generations as a form of providing support, reflecting the support received and addressing resources perceived as lacking.

> These Facebook groups, in my view, are a tremendous resource in terms of personal support. For instance, I often pause and help by responding to people, commenting on posts. I believe this direct support truly makes a difference on a personal level. It has been essential for me. (g., nonbinary, 22)

In this regard, all participants emphasize the challenges faced in their journey. This includes the struggle to find practical information on the gender affirmation pathway and the difficulties experienced while living with doubts during their questioning period, not having proper words resonating with their experience. This was particularly relevant for nonbinary participants who had limited access to information. For them, the SNSs were essential to get access to information, and based on this experiential knowledge, they are actively involved in producing informative contents, targeting specific groups that may have more trouble being out in the offline community (e.g., adolescents).

> Back then, I didn't know about nonbinary identities. Feeling neither fully like a boy nor a girl troubled me for eight years. I felt the need to send messages, especially on TikTok, where a small but active audience, mainly 13 to 15-year-olds, could benefit. I believe these messages, delivered effectively, could make a difference in their lives or at least brighten their day. (c., nonbinary, 20)

Another way to assist future generations in avoiding the obstacles they faced, such as the lack of resources in the Italian language, besides sharing their own experience, is through translation of relevant resources. Even if translation may appear a trivial issue in 2024, the possibility to access resources in one's native language is essential a matter of recognition, as identities are constructed in discourses: a lack of discourses about you can convey the idea that you do not exist because linguistic practices and resources are inextricably linked to identities (Norton & Toohey, 2011):

> Sharing resources is vital to me because previous generations lacked access to Italian resources. I'm translating 'Life is Non-Binary' with a friend to address this gap. While Italian publishing is slowly catching on, there's still much to be done. I focus on autofiction and self-training, as reflected in my Instagram page. (r., trans masc, 32)

Sharing and producing supportive resources are sustained by a personal investment that can foster both individual and collective experiences of being relevant, contributing members of the community and feeling influential. This, in turn, can contribute to sense of belonging and connection. However, virtual influence, exerted through content production, does not necessarily entail feedback for the users of the content and the community as a whole, which

can also raise doubts. H. links their impostor syndrome experience to the fear of lacking significant impact, but it is not totally clear if they are questioning their own capacity of having an impact or the capacity of the online platform itself.

> I feel the impostor syndrome creeping in, telling me, 'Sure, you're sharing your thoughts, but are you really making a significant impact?' Or maybe your contribution isn't as vital as you think. I believe it's more of a psychological barrier on my part. (h. gender questioning, 25)

Participants' active engagement in creating resources and providing support reflects their commitment to the community's growth and positive development and their willingness to make a difference. Their narratives, indeed, underscore the importance of offering a meaningful, recognizable contribution to their community that has the power to validate each singular experience.

3.1.5 | Validation and self-recognition

Validation is deemed an essential resource for TGD activists, as "*making people feel valid is crucial, even more than combating negativity*" (c., nonbinary, 20).

Experiencing respect and identity validation from online interactions enhances this positive emotional experience, which is one of the key needs for TDG people according to interviewees. Participants also highlighted that SNS can represent spaces of self-recognition thanks to the shared and inclusive knowledge disseminated through these platforms.

> On Instagram, I stumbled upon a post that caught my eye - it had a diagram dividing people into cis, trans, with the nonbinary category under the trans spectrum. It made me think, 'Oh, there's more out there.' So, I started diving into every post and scientific article I could find. (f., nonbinary, 23)

3.1.6 | Authenticity exploration

Satisfying knowledge needs is often the first and most prominent reason for approaching social networks. However, knowledge shared on SNS on TGD issues is not only made by mere numbers and figures; it is mostly based on lived experience. Sharing personal stories, doubts and fears contributes to the feeling of shared emotional connections. In participants' experience, SNSs sustain a positive sense of togetherness that makes the community a safe place where people feel somehow protected. This perception of safety facilitates exploring authenticity while disclosing gender modality, chosen names and pronouns.

> I don't use the label 'trans' much in everyday life since I haven't come out yet. However, I feel comfortable using it online, especially with people I trust. It's a label that resonates with me and makes me feel at ease with myself, so I perceive it as the right label for me. (z., boy, 19)

SNS, in this sense, function as platforms for positive emotional exploration, nurturing both individual affirmation and collective recognition.

Additionally, integrating multiple perspectives, SNSs serve as amplifiers of intersectional reflection, questioning binary gender roles, ableism and body standards. This reflection opens the possibility of reaching a critical awareness and various degrees of self-acceptance.

> My only role models were slim individuals with a specific physique. However, on social media, especially Instagram, I began following profiles discussing gender fluidity, body positivity, and fat liberation movements. This exposed me to a broader spectrum of body types, freeing me from conventional standards and helping me feel comfortable in my own skin. (z., boy, 19)

While SNSs open the door to see other imaginaries, to deconstruct normative majoritarian trajectories, they are also places for stereotypical narratives to spread and gain consensus, also within the TDG communities. Participants shared to live with the ambiguity of transnormative members trying to impose hierarchies and trace a line between what defines a "true" trans experience by challenging this monolithic view engaging in discussions and reaffirming the need to understand the multitude ways of being TGD.

> Lately on Instagram, I've been debating with other trans people who often impose a singular way of being trans. Comments like 'What is your testosterone level? Because mine is extremely high' are common. I replied that my menstruation hadn't stopped yet, and it felt like they were asserting their trans identity as superior. I understand their discomfort: they struggle with self-acceptance and project their discomfort onto others. There's this somewhat toxic attitude that I think comes from not accepting themselves as trans. Sometimes I think some trans people don't accept being trans and wish they were cis. They try to hide it but can't fully do so, and in some way, they project their discomfort onto you. Instead, diversity should be celebrated, and everyone has the right to express their identity authentically. (e., man, 27)

Participants' responses to transnormative attitudes or negative comments from the TGD community typically involve trying to open a conversation and engage in critical discussion when the other person is willing to listen. However, dialogue is not always possible. To counteract transnormative narratives within the TGD community, participants' approaches go beyond replying individually to followers. They are also active in producing content that presents a myriad of possibilities regarding TGD experiences and the gender-affirming journey. This includes highlighting various avenues for achieving bodily satisfaction beyond traditional medicalized paths. One participant, for instance, shares on their blog and social profile how tools, such as sex toys, can help modify bodies and achieve confidence:

> I don't want to become a sex toy reviewer or do partnerships. I just want to offer something similar in an illustrated form because I love following reviews on other people's blogs. But often, you read a review and think, 'okay, this toy is good,' and that's it. I realize especially for young people, like those who, at eighteen, want to undergo phalloplasty. There's nothing wrong with that, but they see the transition as something they have to complete before they can live their life. With my blog and social media, I want to show other possibilities. I say, 'Look, you can exist in this dimension or find satisfaction in other ways. Maybe there are things you could use that you would prefer to use.' (f., trans nonbinary, 29)

All interviewed activists emphasize the importance of deconstructing certain norms without adopting judgemental attitudes towards the ways each TGD individual experiences their gender-affirming pathways. Instead, their focus is on creating content for other TGD individuals whose experiences do not align with standardized gender norms.

3.2 | Responsibility

Participants identified different ways in which SNS communities represent a responsibility. Belonging entails nurturing a norm of reciprocity and a sense of duty towards the community at large and the younger generation. These

responsibilities translate into concrete actions of *giving back*, such as making efforts to *change contexts through education* and *affirming social justice and universalistic values* embodied in educational and critical practices.

3.2.1 | Giving back

Participants in this study demonstrate a growing inclination to give back, driven by the significant role that the virtual community played in meeting their needs upon their engagement with the SNS.

> These Facebook groups, I really believe… I think they're a huge source of support… I can comment on these posts, if I feel I can lend a hand. It's incredibly helpful for someone. For me, it was absolutely essential. (g., nonbinary, 22);

> I think these messages, if communicated well, could really impact someone's life or at least bring some brightness to their day. (c., nonbinary, 20);

> Sharing resources is important to me because previous generations didn't have access to Italian resources. (r., trans masc, 32)

They also appear motivated by a sense of benevolence, desiring to shield future generations from their own struggles. This altruistic impulse manifests in two distinct practices weve previously examined: resource sharing and support provision. Now, let's delve into "transformative" education, which emerges as the most prominent form of community responsibility facilitated by online platforms.

3.2.2 | Changing contexts through education

Changing contexts through education was reported by participants as a relevant way to actively participate within the virtual space. Educating others allows for countering corrosive narratives regarding TDG issues and LGBTQIA + matters more broadly. Participants clearly defined this engagement as an act of responsibility, a chance to "play your part" standing on the side of problem solvers, rather than problem makers.

> Everyone should play their part, especially if you find yourself as a minority within a minority, such as non-binary or asexual individuals. It's essential to make others understand that you exist and deserve recognition and inclusion. (p., nonbinary, 19)

Educating can translate into various actions: disseminating knowledge through the creation of ad hoc posts, translating scientific books and articles into Italian and being out and sharing personal experiences. Each of these activities represents a valuable contribution to creating new narratives within and outside the TGD communities.

> On Instagram, I address topics like sexual orientation, and I've openly come out as pansexual to everyone. This allows me to discuss and engage with others on this topic without feeling ashamed. My focus is primarily on issues related to sexual orientation. (m., gender questioning, 21)

For TGD activists, the virtual space is fundamental to sustaining and scaling up their engagement actions, extending their capability to influence both physical and virtual contexts they interact with

I strive to offer as much information as I can to those I encounter; it's incredibly important to me. While I currently have a minimal presence on social media, I aim to become a content creator over time. I want to utilize my platform to inform, create positive spaces, break stereotypes, and foster acceptance for everyone. (o., man, 19)

SNSs increase the catchment area, making contents accessible to a larger population. Our participants started to take advantage of this by creating events where they share their knowledge with the support of allied professionals.

We recently hosted an Instagram live with a psychotherapist and FTM individuals, discussing sexuality during the pandemic. Now, we're part of an awareness campaign on sexual freedom. I handle the social aspect while others manage graphics and testimonials. This initiative is led by an association, including a psychologist and other important figures. (t., man, 29)

However, the same asset that grants anonymity to TGD people while experimenting with coming out and authenticity and consents to reach out to a wider community can easily become one of the biggest challenges that rows against participants' active engagement and endangers the safety aura of certain contexts.

On TikTok, I've received incredibly hateful comments, some even wishing me death. Despite the possibility of the algorithm removing them through reports, I've personally chosen to delete these comments. I believe in maintaining my profile as a safe space. (c., nonbinary, 20)

Again, this requires a firm commitment and concrete sustained actions to maintain the community as a safe space.

3.2.3 | Affirming social justice and universalistic values

Countering harmful narratives and promoting inclusivity reflect a sense of responsibility for community well-being, which does not always come with benefits or the expectation of gaining something positive in return. Despite challenges like facing backlash, participants are committed to shaping positive change and fostering understanding within their communities. SNS can also be a concrete space of social justice, offering opportunities to be activists who are precluded to minoritized groups based on dominant norms (e.g., ableism).

For a while, I was doing activism without even realizing it, mainly because our society is ableist. I didn't get the chance to join protests or demonstrations in person, so I just started sharing information for free to educate people as best I could. Then it hit me – activism isn't just about being out on the streets; it's also about being there for others and doing what you can with what you've got. So, in a nutshell, my activism is mostly about teaching the people around me. (h. gender questioning, 25)

4 | DISCUSSION

Over the past few decades, our understanding of virtual communities has expanded significantly. However, the constantly evolving codes and meanings within SNS continually challenge us to deepen our comprehension of the virtual landscape. This challenge becomes particularly pertinent when virtual communities serve as unique platforms for identity exploration, self-expression and activism in response to the barriers faced in physical spaces by marginalized groups. In contexts where physical hostility prevails, can virtual communities effectively establish alternative spaces

where marginalized groups can seek recognition and protection? And, once these alternative spaces are established, what are the drivers, if any, that support community cohesion and development efforts?

To answer these questions, a group of Italian TGD activists was invited to share their narratives and the role played by SNS in their lives, aiming to understand their experiences within virtual communities exploring challenges, potentials and perceptions by applying Boyd and Nowell's (2017) community experience framework. The results revealed that the community experience framework effectively captures the nuances of participants' virtual experiences, suggesting that the dimensions of resource and responsibility are applicable to communities, whether geographical or virtual.

Regarding RQ1, the results demonstrate that Italian TGD activists perceive SNS as a valuable resource. Despite encountering challenges, such as risks of harassment, hate speech and rejection, SNSs are seen as offering a unique opportunity to meet urgent and essential needs for TGD individuals and their well-being. These needs may not be fully met, or may only be partially met, in the geographical space. Accessing information emerged as a crucial aspect, with participants emphasizing the importance of SNS in providing a wealth of resources related to TGD identities and gender affirmation pathways (Blanchard et al., 2011; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023). Most importantly, these resources are mostly co-produced and decentralized: they do not rely on experts, formal knowledge or dominant elites. They are the product of the margins and represent a concrete attempt to overcome asymmetries in knowledge legitimization. These resources also contribute to countering the systematic underrepresentation of TGD individuals in more traditional media, fostering positive identification and self-recognition. Moreover, the resources mobilized through SNS are symbolic or informational but also material, aiming to benefit TGD community members whose gender affirmation is hindered by economic marginalization and poverty—an often-overlooked dimension of the experiences of many TGD individuals, despite its significant impact (Shannon, 2022).

Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube were identified as valuable sources of knowledge, offering diverse perspectives and lived experiences that resonate with individual journeys. These SNSs facilitate identity exploration and authenticity, serving as safe environments where TGD individuals can question their identities, experiment with different labels and pronouns and share personal stories without fear of judgement or discrimination (Manago & McKenzie, 2022; Rotman & Wu, 2015). For TGD people, safe sites in everyday offline life are limited, as most societal contexts are intrinsically biased by hegemonic and heteronormative narratives and having the possibility to "hang out" in virtual spaces where heteronormativity is not the rule opens spaces for acceptance, confirming previous literature on the role of the virtual sphere in fostering relationships (Gatti & Procentese, 2022). Creating safe spaces on SNS is vital to nurture sense of belonging and membership. Moreover, social networking platforms offer unique opportunities for TGD individuals to experiment with and affirm their identities, providing a space for self-determination that is often constrained in physical spaces due to legal and societal barriers (Lorusso et al., 2023). SNSs offer their users the freedom to safely, through anonymity, experiment with names, pronouns, avatars and gender modalities that transcend binary options, reinforcing a sense of autonomy and agency in identity expression, which in turn can contribute to fulfil a need for power. Identity affirmation assumes particular relevance for individuals who, in many everyday contexts, are marginalized precisely because of specific facets of their identity.

SNSs provide a platform for activists to challenge hegemonic narratives on trans experiences and promote diverse representations of gender identities and bodies. As such they offer the possibility to wield power and act coherently with the desire to contrast systems of oppression that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Activists recognize the important role of the SNS community as a resource for an articulated list of crucial conditions (accessing information, identity exploration, self-recognition and exploring authenticity) for their well-being, which satisfy the psychological needs of affiliation and belonging, creating safe spaces. They have benefited from SNS in this sense, and recognizing their power, they use it to contribute to others' well-being.

This finding leads us directly to RQ2. Activists create and exchange content aimed at deconstructing trans-normative views, but also content designed for providing informative and emotional support with the explicit aims to (a) give back to the community sharing and circulating resources while offering guidance; (b) counter corrosive narrative, within and outside the TGD communities, creating new inclusive and intersectional ones; and (c) facilitate transformative education while advocating for social justice.

This picture is coherent with the findings of Greijdanus et al. (2020), concerning the different forms that activism can take online. But it adds an important point: activists perceive SNS as spaces of responsibilities towards their communities and future generations. Why are activists doing what they do online? It is because it is important for them and for people like them. Activists are moved by the desire to take some of the pain out of the experiences of other members of the TGD communities, especially youngsters, and fill that information vacuum they are confronted with while starting their journeys. At the same time, they want to give back the same support, identity exploration and validation that they received to circulate resources in virtuous spirals. For these reasons, activists devote material and immaterial resources. Motives behind online engagement seem intrinsically linked to altruistic values (universalism and benevolence) and an obligation to act in coherence with them. Blanchard et al. (2011), in their study on the sense of virtual community, found that the obligation to give back was present but only among leaders, who had a different behavioural profile on SNS compared to lurkers (person who watches activity online but who do not participate).

Online activism satisfies the needs for influence and, to some extent, for achievement, even if participants also account for the difficulty of receiving clear feedback on their capacity to be effectively influential. From the accounts of most participants, it is clear that SNS host only a portion of their activism, which takes place offline and is ubiquitous. However, others reveal that the characteristics of virtual spaces have opened up possibilities for activism to people who are marginalized in the physical societies they inhabit (Noveck et al., 2021). In our study, this is true for TGD individuals who do not want to come out in real-life contexts, as well as for those who experience multiple marginalizations (e.g., gender identities and disabilities). In this sense, SNSs offer spaces for intersectional reflections on gender, body norms and ableism, contributing to more inclusive and socially justice-oriented discourses (Lopez-Leon & Casanova, 2023; Schmitz et al., 2022), which are appreciated by our population.

So, are SNS all that glitters gold for TGD people? Obviously not.

Anonymity and the possibility to play with identities offer a sense of safety, while also exposing users to the risk of receiving homophobic and transphobic hate comments, both from external users and within the TGD community itself (Herrmann, Bindt, Hohmann, & Becker-Hebly, 2024). This internal criticism often reinforces transnormative views and imposes standards on what constitutes a legitimate trans identity, exacerbating discrimination within the community (Parmenter, Galliher, & Maughan, 2021). This is specifically happening for nonbinary individuals, receiving criticism from trans men and women and cisgender gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. It is important to note that, despite these challenges, SNSs provide diverse representations of gender modalities and bodies and a platform for activists to challenge hegemonic narratives on trans experiences. Activists demonstrate critical consciousness in their strategies to counteract negative comments, especially when these comments stem from transnormative views within the TGD community. They strive to create spaces for constructive dialogue, promoting the understanding that there is an infinite spectrum of TGD experiences. Participants recognize that transnormative attitudes often arise from societal stigmatization and normative expectations, which TGD individuals may internalize while navigating gender-affirming pathways for social, medical and legal recognition (Lorusso, Rosati, et al., 2024). These critical conversational spaces are cultivated through both individual interactions, such as private chat conversations, and collective efforts through public posts aimed at fostering reflection on the deconstruction of transnormativity. However, engaging in these discussions exposes activists to vulnerabilities, as they may face attacks from both within the TGD community and other users of SNS. As previously mentioned, SNSs offer anonymity facilitating ease in attacking others. Nevertheless, SNSs also provide means of self-protection. In response to offensive interactions, activists may choose to delete comments or refrain from responding to private messages, thereby safeguarding their online profiles and ensuring a safer SNS experience (Scheuerman et al., 2018).

5 | CONCLUSION

This study showed that SNS communities represent a key field of action for TGD activists both for the opportunities that they provide to reach out to a large audience, create relationships, mobilize energies and engagement. As such

they appear significant in offering meaningful community experiences that, being geared towards the production of common good and collective resources are sustained by a sense of responsibility, a commitment to give back and affirmative action. The findings reveal that the SNS community experience shares many features of offline/local community experiences, with some singularities that articulate some specific needs of TDG communities with the opportunities offered by social media.

Our results also show that processes that are considered typical to form sense of virtual community, apply to the online community of TGD activists in a peculiar way. Emotional safety emerged as a critical resource of SNS communities for TGD activists, as it assists in identity exploration. The opportunities provided in this sense by SNS were sketched already by Blanchard (2011) when she said that recognition was the first step to forming a virtual sense of community, while the second was identification, in the sense of developing an understanding of other members identities. Interestingly, among TGD folks, exploration translates into self-recognition as well as the process of (self) understanding identities. Exchanging support also has prominence in the TGD online communities that are not common in other SNS where active intentional participation to provide support is limited.

Furthermore, the findings help us define a sense of virtual community responsibility that originates from the commitment to community support and the creation of a positive change. The sense of virtual community responsibility is founded in the commitment to (a) give back to the community sharing and circulating resources while offering guidance; (b) counter corrosive narrative, within and outside the TGD communities, creating new inclusive and intersectional ones; and (c) facilitate transformative education while advocating for social justice.

Is this sufficient to claim that this applies to any type of SNS community? Certainly, we have no elements to say that this is the case for all SNS communities, but it is reasonable to think that this type of community experience could be relevant for multifarious virtual communities of activists, and in particular for those who advocate for social justice and voice the concerns of the minoritized group.

Besides suggesting and confirming a sense of virtual community and a sense of virtual community responsibility, this study prompts another question: does it (still) make sense to differentiate between virtual and physical communities or should we move beyond these distinctions and challenge yet another dichotomy?

For certain lived experiences, the virtual sphere aids access to the physical and tangible realm. For example, Discord, a platform offering various communication mediums like text, voice, video messaging and photo sharing across multiple channels, has been shown to serve as a facilitator that empowers users to participate in the network on equal footing and share their narratives. Although it operates in the virtual domain, Discord fosters genuine human connections, a sense of community and a community of care (Betts et al., 2023) representing a concrete example that participation is no longer dependent on place (offline vs. online; Hirzalla & Zoonen, 2011). Moreover, members of the queer community ask to access activism and community life without feeling "confined." For instance, in the Italian LGBTQIA+ community, the neurodivergent community is advocating for Pride marches to be accessible and for the option to attend events live via social media channels (SondaPride, 2024). Virtual, however, does not mean accessible by default. Digital literacy and inclusive digital tools are needed to avoid the same systems of exclusion present in the offline landscape (Setiadi, Nurhayati, Ansori, Zubaidi, & Amir, 2023).

If we are prepared to conceptualize communities as hybrid spaces, integrating virtual and in-person support, resources, opportunities and responsibilities, are we also prepared to delve deeper into examining the interconnectedness between virtual and physical spaces and their implications for community well-being? According to the Digital 2024 Global Overview Report (Kemp, 2024), the number of Internet users, which saw a dramatic increase during the COVID-19 pandemic, is still growing worldwide, with almost 7 in 10 people on Earth already using the Internet, spending an average of almost 7 hr online. Moreover, in January 2024, social networking sites reached 5 billion users who spend, on average, 2.5 hr per day using them (Kemp, 2024). These figures inevitably challenge us to reconsider how we conceptualize and engage with community-building efforts, particularly with minority groups who face unique barriers in both online and offline environments and, therefore, seamlessly transition from online to offline action, taking advantage of maintaining these dimensions together rather than separate.

As community psychologists, it is imperative for us to recognize the dynamic nature of communities and the fluidity of their boundaries, embracing pluralistic and intersectional perspectives. Only by complementing our research and professional activities in the virtual space can we strive towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments that recognize and celebrate the diversity of human experiences and empower individuals to thrive, online and offline.

6 | LIMITS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Regarding the limitations of our study, we acknowledge its exploratory nature and the fact that our data are derived from a limited group of participants, who represent a subset of a larger collection of interviews. These limitations prompt us to shift our focus towards building targeted research on the use of SNS within TGD and LGBTQIA+ communities, constructing tailored studies and tools. Further research should explore the community experience within other SNS and with larger groups of TDG participants. Additionally, to further explore how sociocultural and normative aspects influence the use of SNS—from the policies present on these platforms to how users engage with each other and interact with posts, and how this is influenced by either the dominant culture or reflects underground cultures—an ecological approach to studying SNS should be employed (Navarro & Tudge, 2023). We also consider it necessary to conduct more research with participants who experience virtual communities without considering their experience as a form of activism, in order to understand potentials and risks. Moreover, the implementation of mixed-method research could allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of the community experience that occurs in the virtual space and the specific values associated with this experience. Finally, our study exclusively involved young participants as a result of the recruitment strategy adopted. However, as we know that virtual communities are relevant for older generations as well, future research could consider including older participants in the discourse.

Moreover, our research offered a limited representation of the neurodivergent and disabled communities, partially considered the socio-economic status impact on participants' experiences, and did not include individuals experiencing language proficiency barriers. Opening a space of confrontation regarding how the intersection of multiple systems of oppression can influence and determine daily experiences with marginalization and social injustice is essential to shift from reflection to meta-reflection on inclusion and exclusion processes of minoritized identities within the LGBTQIA+ communities—we believe this applies to other communities as well. Implementing new recruitment strategies like establishing networks with leaders from minoritized communities to serve as recruitment facilitators or disseminating flyers during gatherings or social events and employing participative research methods, such as photovoice or participatory art processes, would be beneficial and instrumental. These approaches could create a space conducive to intersectional dialogue, utilizing hybrid settings to ensure access to diverse experiences and needs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All aspects of this study were scrutinized and approved by the Ethic Committee of the University of Bologna. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Gender-diversity includes trans, nonbinary, and gender questioning individuals who express identities beyond the traditional binary framework. Trans people usually identify with a gender different from their assigned one at birth and nonbinary individuals usually do not strictly align with male or female identities (American Psychological Association, 2015). Notably, not all nonbinary individuals identify as trans (Di Giannantonio et al., 2024).

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