
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Awareness, Knowledge, and Preference of Pronouns by Non-Binary College Students: A Sociolinguistic Inquiry

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| ABSTRACT

Pronouns indicate significant importance in both pedagogical and communicative contexts, as they shape the way individuals are addressed and understood in social interactions and educational settings. Beyond the traditional pronouns “he” and “she,” the American Psychological Association endorses the scholarly use of the singular pronoun “they,” recognizing its relevance in promoting inclusive language practices. In addition, the popularity of neopronouns continues to rise, providing non-binary individuals with a broader range of linguistic options to express their identities. Despite this growing recognition, there remains a dearth of empirical research that systematically investigates the awareness, knowledge, and preferences regarding pronoun use among non-binary populations. Addressing this gap, the present quantitative inquiry examined the level of awareness, knowledge, and preference of pronouns among non-binary college students at a state university in the Philippines. The study involved 80 participants, including 20 lesbians, 20 gays, 20 bisexual males, and 20 bisexual females, selected through criterion sampling, who responded to a four-part researcher-developed survey questionnaire. The results indicate that, overall, non-binary college students are aware of the categories of pronouns ($M=2.48$, $SD=0.39$ for traditional pronouns; $M=2.79$, $SD=0.25$ for gender-neutral pronouns; and $M=2.64$, $SD=0.32$ for neopronouns) and knowledgeable about them ($M=2.49$, $SD=0.31$ for traditional pronouns; $M=2.68$, $SD=0.23$ for gender-neutral pronouns; and $M=2.47$, $SD=0.32$ for neopronouns). However, despite this awareness and knowledge, participants expressed a preference for using traditional pronouns (“he” and “she”) when being referred to. These findings underscore the persistence of traditional linguistic norms in educational settings and highlight the potential influence of formal language instruction on pronoun preference. Empirically, this study contributes to the limited body of research on non-binary pronoun use specifically in the Philippines, providing a foundational dataset that can inform inclusive language policies, pedagogical strategies, and future sociolinguistic investigations. Its significance lies not only in documenting patterns of pronoun awareness and preference but also in offering evidence-based insights for educators, policymakers, and advocates seeking to foster more inclusive and affirming learning environments.

| KEYWORDS

Traditional pronouns, gender-neutral pronouns, neopronouns, non-binary college students

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Pronouns have increasingly become a focal point in contemporary discussions of language, identity, and social inclusion. Traditionally, pronouns function as grammatical substitutes for nouns, allowing speakers and writers to avoid repetition and maintain coherence in discourse. In both spoken and written communication, the repeated use of the same noun can render a message redundant or stylistically awkward; thus, pronouns serve as an essential linguistic mechanism for reference. Beyond their structural role in grammar, however, pronouns also operate as sociolinguistic markers that reflect identity, interpersonal relationships, and the evolving norms of language use (Baron, 2020; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Consequently, pronoun

choice has become an important site where linguistic practice intersects with issues of gender identity, representation, and linguistic rights.

Historically, English grammar has relied on the masculine pronoun *he* as a generic reference for individuals of unspecified gender. While this convention dominated earlier prescriptive grammar traditions, many scholars and institutions have since challenged its exclusionary implications. Alternatives such as *he or she* emerged as attempts to promote inclusivity, though these constructions are often criticized for being cumbersome in discourse (Bodine, 1975; Baron, 2020). More recently, linguistic and institutional authorities have recognized the singular pronoun *they* as a gender-neutral alternative that can refer to an indefinite antecedent or to individuals who do not identify within the traditional gender binary. The American Psychological Association (2019) formally endorsed the use of singular *they* in academic writing, acknowledging its role in promoting inclusive language practices. Public figures have also contributed to increasing awareness of pronoun preferences; for instance, singer Sam Smith publicly announced their preference for the pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their*, further bringing pronoun usage into mainstream discourse.

Beyond the singular *they*, the linguistic landscape has expanded with the emergence of neopronouns, which are newly coined pronouns used by some individuals whose gender identities fall outside conventional male or female categories. These forms, including pronouns such as *ze*, *zir*, and *xe*, have been discussed in sociolinguistic literature as efforts to accommodate diverse gender identities and provide linguistic recognition for non-binary individuals (Bradley et al., 2019; Kailey, 2012). Such developments highlight how language evolves in response to social change, particularly within communities seeking representation and inclusivity in linguistic practices.

Empirical studies have begun examining public awareness and attitudes toward gender-neutral pronouns. A national survey conducted by the Pew Research Center reported that a substantial proportion of Americans have heard about individuals who prefer gender-neutral pronouns such as *they* (Geiger & Graf, 2019). Generational differences also appear significant. Research by Kim Parker and colleagues (2020) found that members of Generation Z are more likely than millennials to personally know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns, reflecting shifting cultural attitudes toward gender diversity. These findings suggest that awareness of pronoun preferences is increasing, particularly among younger populations who are growing up in a more inclusive sociocultural environment.

Despite these developments, scholarly investigations remain concentrated largely in Western contexts, particularly in North America and Europe. Studies examining pronoun awareness, knowledge, and usage among non-binary individuals in Southeast Asia remain limited. In the Philippine context, research on gender and language has primarily focused on broader themes of gender identity, discourse, and representation, leaving a notable gap in empirical investigations of pronoun awareness and preferences among non-binary populations. This gap is particularly significant within higher education institutions, where students encounter diverse linguistic practices and where inclusive language policies may increasingly shape academic and social interactions.

Addressing this gap is important for both sociolinguistic scholarship and institutional policy development. Understanding the level of awareness and knowledge of gender-neutral and non-binary pronouns among college students can provide insights into how linguistic practices reflect broader social attitudes toward gender diversity. Moreover, examining the pronoun preferences of non-binary students can contribute to the development of inclusive communication practices and language policies within educational institutions. In response to these needs, the present study investigates the awareness, knowledge, and pronoun preferences of non-binary college students, providing empirical evidence that may inform discussions on inclusive language, gender sensitivity, and institutional language policy in higher education.

This research explored the pronoun awareness, knowledge, and preference of non-binary college students. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of the participants on the three categories of pronouns when taken as a whole and when grouped according to sexual orientation?
2. What is the level of knowledge of the participants on the three categories of pronouns when taken as a whole and when grouped according to sexual orientation?
3. What are the preferences of non-binary college students on pronoun usage?
4. What sociolinguistic implications can be derived from the findings of the study?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Muted Group Theory

Muted Group Theory (MGT), articulated by Edwin and Shirley in Bertulfo's work (2019), offers a specific theoretical framework within sociolinguistics. This theory explores how marginalized groups are silenced and excluded through language dynamics. The term "muted" refers to groups that are overshadowed by the dominant group in society. Initially, MGT focused on the historical suppression of women's voices in research, attributed to the predominance of male researchers who overlooked or minimized women's perspectives in their studies. Over time, MGT has expanded its scope to encompass other marginalized identities, including race, class, and sexual orientation (Houston & Kramarae, 1991).

Muted Group Theory (MGT), as discussed by Bertulfo (2019), has evolved to encompass the LGBTQ community and non-binary individuals. At its core, MGT posits that language primarily benefits its creators—the dominant group—while those in subordinate groups must adapt and struggle to effectively use it. The concept of "mutedness" denotes the inability of marginalized groups to fully express themselves within this linguistic framework.

According to the theory, the dominant group largely shapes the language system, establishing norms and vocabulary, which may not fully accommodate the linguistic needs or identities of subordinate groups. While there have been efforts to introduce gender-neutral or inclusive nouns, certain lexical categories still require adjustment to better serve the linguistic rights of these "muted" groups.

This study selected participants of the LGBTQ community who are also called non-binary individuals. Aside from other forms of human rights, their language representation, especially regarding their pronoun use, may be considered a sociolinguistic reality highlighting "mutedness." They cannot express their identity through pronoun use since there is yet to be substantial empirical data about legitimizing the use of pronouns other than the traditional "he" or "she." Hence, with this framework, the knowledge, awareness, and preference of pronouns by non-binary individuals as part of the muted group were identified and analyzed.

2.2 Pronouns

Pronouns indicate a lot of significant importance both in the pedagogical and communicative aspects. Martin et al. (2020) indicated that knowledge of using the correct pronoun to refer to someone supports inclusivity. Additionally, they mentioned that it is appropriate to show respect by using the correct pronoun for the person in question. Gender-neutral pronouns provide a practical alternative when a pronoun is uncertain or not specified. Using incorrect pronouns, whether intentionally or not, can be painful, upsetting, and even distracting. For some, it can feel as though they are being told they do not matter or deserve respect. People's social mobility and interpersonal interactions are hampered when their identity is invalidated. There might be people who do not have substantial knowledge about the emergence of gender-neutral pronouns or other novel pronouns; however, it would be of great significance if they had awareness about these and how they are used.

The National Education Association (2022) highlighted that pronouns affirm gender identities and create safe spaces for students, while misgendering results in marginalization and communicates that a person's identity is not considered necessary. Understanding and recognizing individuals' different pronouns to identify themselves or others remain crucial. This includes being aware of gender-neutral pronouns, such as "they/them" or "ze/hir," and respecting an individual's preferred pronouns. Being pronoun aware is essential to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all individuals, regardless of gender identity or expression. Using an individual's correct pronouns is essential to show respect and validation for their identity. It takes conscious effort to acquire and acclimate to new pronouns that may not have been previously recognized or utilized. Pronoun awareness is a continuous process. This can be accomplished by becoming knowledgeable about the various pronoun possibilities, getting feedback from others regarding their preferred pronouns, and adopting inclusive language in all contexts. Recent studies like the work of Fossal et al. (2022) revealed that for individuals who identified as genderqueer (non-cisgender), significantly higher scores of satisfaction, comfort, and perceived relevance of the questions were elicited when they were given a survey that asked about their gender pronoun versus a survey that did not ask the pronoun question. This indicates that pronoun preference plays a significant role in the lives of LGBTQ+ or non-binary individuals. These challenges, trends, and prospects on pronouns are based on how pronouns evolved and categorized. A summary of related studies revealed that pronouns can be classified as traditional, gender-neutral, and neopronouns.

2.3 Traditional Pronouns

Traditional pronouns, which have been widely used in English for a long time, include personal pronouns. The generic pronoun "he" typically designates a male referent. For example, "Berto remembered that he left his food inside the house." For a typical female referent, the pronoun "she" is used. For example, "Jessica mentioned that she would process her admission requirements."

However, problems occur when the referents have an indeterminate or neutral gender. For example, a student said that wanted to leave the classroom. Spender (1980) noted that men generally favor using masculine generic pronouns to safeguard their socioeconomic advantages and maintain their dominance. Therefore, most men might choose the pronoun "he" to complete a sentence. Conversely, feminists argue that this approach lacks representation of women. They see the use of masculine generic pronouns as a "discriminatory, gendered practice" rather than a "neutrally arbitrary grammatical convention" (Silverstein, 1985). Consequently, feminists prefer using non-binary pronouns like "he or she" and the singular "they." This means feminists would opt for "he or she" or "they" to complete the previously mentioned sample sentence.

2.4 Gender-Neutral Pronouns

Relevant studies have shown diverse findings on pronoun usage and preference. LaScotte (2016) observed that the singular "they" was the most commonly used pronoun in his study, which involved 38 participants completing a survey about "The Ideal Student." Although scholars have argued that the singular pronoun "they" has been used by many renowned writers such as Chaucer and Shakespeare (Balhorn, 2004), traditionalists still consider it ungrammatical and inappropriate because its use as a non-binary pronoun is relatively recent (Wayne, 2005).

To address this issue, the 7th Edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual, published in 2019, has endorsed the scholarly use of the singular pronoun "they" when referring to a person whose gender is unknown or irrelevant to the context. "They" can also be used for a specific, known person who uses "they" as their pronoun. According to APA (2019), using the singular "they" promotes inclusivity and helps writers avoid assumptions about gender. However, using the singular pronoun can cause confusion, so APA (2019) established a guideline that "they" still takes a plural verb. This is exemplified in the following sentences: One participant wanted their project to be submitted right away. They believe it has to be recorded right away. This usage creates confusion in grammar and meaning.

Interestingly, the issues surrounding pronouns extend beyond the lack of female representation or the legitimacy of the singular pronoun "they." A more recent concern focuses on linguistic rights, particularly pronoun representation within the LGBTQ+ community. Calvente (2018) noted that language has the power to create new pronouns, words, and concepts, and in doing so, it also constructs identities. Language can increase visibility for individuals outside the norm.

2.5 Neopronouns

The call for equal linguistic rights for non-binary individuals, often considered a marginalized group, has spurred a movement to popularize and legitimize new pronouns known as neopronouns. These neopronouns may still be unfamiliar or seem new in some contexts due to their limited mainstream use. Blevins (2018) described neopronouns as new types of pronouns used in place of "he or she" or "they," especially when referring to non-binary individuals. Blevins (2018) also highlighted that, like all pronouns, neopronouns are personal to each individual who uses them, yet they share a common purpose: to make individuals feel comfortable and to have their humanity acknowledged and respected. Examples of neopronouns include ey, ne, ve, xe, and ze (Blevins, 2018). The University of North Florida LGBTQ Center (2019) also provided a list of neopronouns, such as xe, ey, zie, ve, per, sie, and ne.

Elverson (1975 as cited in McGaughey, 2020), noted that while many neopronouns may seem new, the pronouns "ey/em/eir" were actually created by Elverson in 1975 to replace "he/him/his" and "she/her/hers." The Chicago Association of Business Communicators recognized these pronouns as the winning entry in a contest for alternatives to gendered pronouns. McGaughey (2020) explained that Elverson referred to this set as "transgender pronouns," and she devised them by dropping the "th" from "they/them/their." McGaughey (2020) also provided another historical account of neopronouns, stating that the set "ne/nis/nir" originated in the 1850s. However, the usage of these pronouns faded until recent months when they started to regain popularity and usage.

Fortunately, recent studies on neopronouns, particularly regarding acceptance and preference, have addressed the lack of data on non-binary pronoun usage, preference, attitudes, and acceptability. In an online survey conducted by Bradley et al. (2019) with 96 participants, the singular "they" was rated as more grammatical than the neopronoun "ze." Similarly, Lund Eide (2018) found that approximately 80% of 136 participants were willing to use the nonbinary pronoun "they," while only about 50% were willing to use neopronouns such as "xe," "zie," "ze," and "ey." According to Parker (2017), non-binary participants

found the singular pronoun "they" more natural than neopronouns; however, non-binary participants rated neopronouns as more natural compared to other participants. In the context of the Philippines, a study by Bertulfo (2019) on the acceptance of neopronouns revealed that 45% of third-year Teacher Education English majors felt the need to add new sets of pronouns, specifically neopronouns like "ne," "ve," "ey," "xe," and "ze." Meanwhile, 25% felt there was no need for new pronouns, and 30% were undecided. Additionally, Bertulfo (2019) inquired whether participants were willing to use a new pronoun to refer to themselves: 25% said yes, 35% disagreed, and 40% were undecided. Regarding using new pronouns to refer to others, 30% were willing, 35% were not willing, and 35% were undecided.

Moreover, 45% of the participants felt that using gender-neutral pronouns obstructs meaning, while 20% disagreed, and 35% were undecided. These studies indicate a dilemma regarding the choice of neopronouns among individuals. Users and proponents of these novel pronouns have not settled on a specific set of neopronouns. Earlier sets were not consistently adopted, leading to the introduction of new neopronouns. Addressing this dilemma, the current study focused on a neopronoun set with a complete range of cases and types. The pronouns created by Elverson (1975) were used as an example, including "ey" for the nominative case, "em" for the objective case, "eir" for the possessive case, "eirs" for the possessive adjective, and "eirself" for the reflexive and intensive form.

In this study, the three categories of pronouns with their nominative case, objective case, and possessive case are introduced:

Traditional Pronouns

Nominative Case: "he" and/or "she"

Sentence Sample: **He** waters the plants everyday.

Objective Case: "him and/or "her"

Sentence Sample: The baby smiled at **him**.

Possessive Case: "his" and/or "hers"

Sentence Sample: Ben opened **his** gift.

Gender-Neutral Pronoun (Singular "they")

Nominative Case: "they"

Sentence Sample: The student was hungry, so **they** ate a cake.

Objective Case: "them"

Sentence Sample: The participant smiled after the officer called **them**.

Possessive Case: "their"

Sentence Sample: The attendee was anxious because **their** ticket is expensive.

Neopronoun 'Ey' (Non-binary with Mark, the subject of the sentence, as bisexual)

Nominative Case: "ey"

Sentence Sample: Mark is a performer. **Ey** dances gracefully.

Objective Case: "em"

Sentence Sample: Since Mark ranked first, the award was given to **em**.

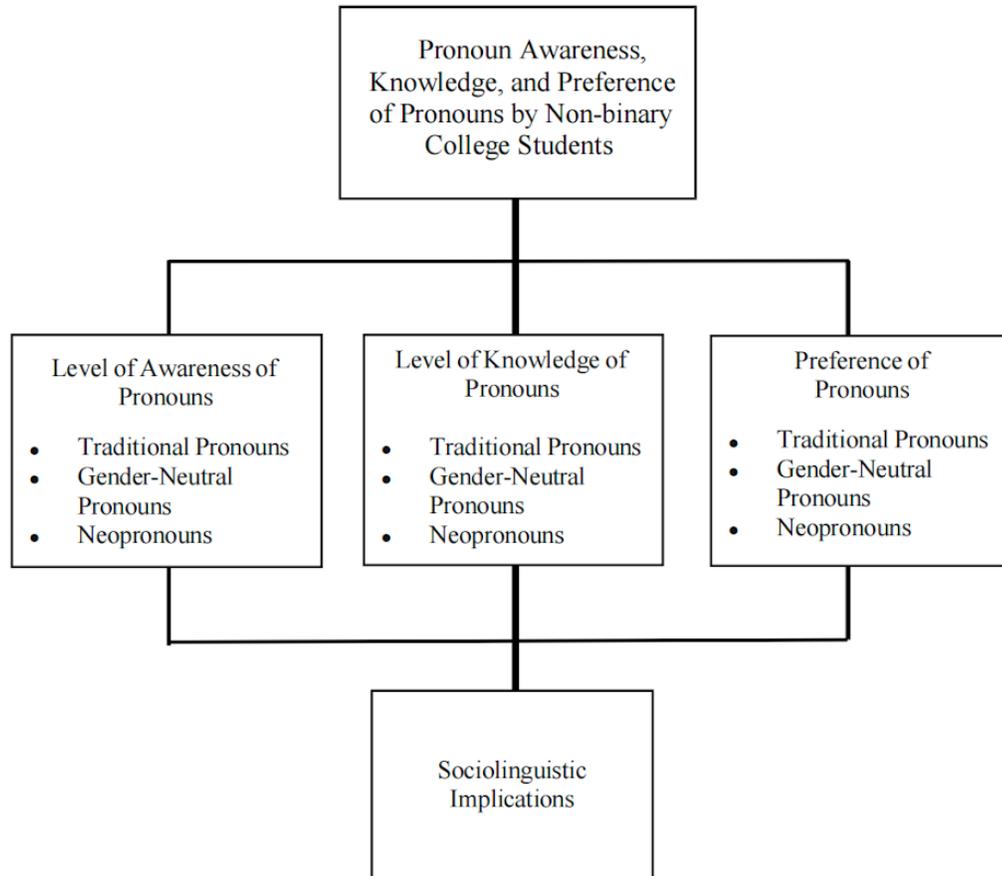
Possessive Case: "eir"

Sentence Sample: Mark was happy because **eir** work is considered remarkable.

The schematic diagram of this research is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Schematic Diagram of the Conceptual Framework of the Study



3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This quantitative sociolinguistic inquiry utilized the descriptive design as it aimed to determine the level of awareness, knowledge, and preference of pronouns of non-binary individuals. McCombes (2022) highlighted that descriptive research seeks to methodically and accurately depict a population, situation, or phenomenon. It addresses questions related to what, where, when, and how. However, descriptive research is limited in its ability to answer questions related to why phenomena occur. McCombes (2022) stated that descriptive research is suitable when the goal is to identify and depict characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories within a phenomenon. It is particularly useful when there is limited prior knowledge about the topic or problem. Given this definition, the descriptive research design is considered suitable for addressing the quantitative aspects of the study, as it aims to identify frequencies, levels, and categories.

3.2 Respondents

The respondents of the study were college students aged 18 to 25 who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual male, or bisexual female. They were selected using purposive or criterion sampling. The participants came from several colleges of a university. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent written in English was provided. Recruitment was conducted through students' email addresses, with the assistance of college secretaries and student councils, who only distributed the survey link and did not have access to the responses, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

3.3 Instrument

The study used a researcher-made survey questionnaire approved by the research panel and validated by three language experts based on content, language use, and technical aspects. One validator recommended using the term “sexual orientation” instead of gender identity, which was adopted throughout the instrument and the study. The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Part 1 gathered the participants’ profile, including sex assigned at birth and sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual male, bisexual female), which determined the official respondents for the succeeding sections. Part 2 measured the level of pronoun awareness using seven statements, with responses categorized as Aware, Moderately Aware, or Not Aware based on a three-point scale. Part 3 assessed the level of pronoun knowledge through nine statements focusing on the types, linguistic roles, and grammatical functions of pronouns, using the same three-point scale. The items for awareness and knowledge were based on the works of LaScotte (2016), Lund Eide (2018), and Elverson (1975). The final part asked participants to rank their preferred pronouns when being referred to by others. The options included traditional pronouns (he/she, him/her, his/hers), the gender-neutral pronoun (they/them/their), and the neopronoun (ey/em/eir), ranked from 1 (most preferred) to 3 (least preferred).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The procedure began with the validation and pilot testing of the research instrument. Three language experts validated the questionnaire, and their comments were incorporated before conducting the pilot test in another state university in Iloilo City with students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual male, and bisexual female. Permission was secured from the university president, and the survey link was disseminated through college secretaries. The first 80 respondents (20 from each group) were selected for the pilot test. Reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha showed acceptable internal consistency: .760 for awareness, .780 for knowledge, and .760 for pronoun preference, consistent with the acceptable range suggested by Devellis (1991) and Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). After finalizing the instrument, permission was again secured from the university president of the actual research site. A demographic survey was distributed via students’ email addresses through college secretaries or student council representatives, ensuring confidentiality since they only shared the survey link and could not access the results. Participants first completed an informed consent form before answering the questionnaire, which included profile information, pronoun awareness, pronoun knowledge, and pronoun preference. Although respondents were given one week to complete the survey, the required responses were obtained within one day. The data were then retrieved from Google Forms and stored in Google Sheets for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data gathered from the survey were analyzed using SPSS software with specific statistical tools. Frequency distribution was used to determine the number of respondents according to their responses, particularly in identifying the participants’ profile. Percentage was employed to determine the proportion of respondents in each demographic category, which helped establish the appropriate sample representation for the study. To address the third research question on pronoun preference, mode was used to identify the most preferred pronoun among the respondents. Meanwhile, mean was utilized to determine the respondents’ levels of awareness and knowledge regarding pronouns, addressing the first and second research questions. Finally, standard deviation was used to measure the consistency and variability of the respondents’ awareness and knowledge levels about pronouns. These statistical tools collectively enabled a clear and systematic interpretation of the survey data.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study prioritized the protection and welfare of non-binary participants, recognizing their vulnerability in society. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, and prior to the data collection, the research underwent a formal ethics review, receiving full clearance with protocol code: STUD-006.22-23.T3.GRAD. The participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and time frame of the study, and their consent was obtained through signed forms. Measures ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and secure data storage, with access limited solely to the researcher. The participants had the right to self-determination, including the ability to refuse or withdraw at any point without penalty. No financial incentives were provided, but participants were offered access to the study’s findings. Data security protocols included encrypted storage, restricted access, and permanent disposal after two years.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Level of Awareness on the Three Categories of Pronouns

In this study, the level of awareness on the three categories of the pronouns indicate the capacity of non-binary college students to perceive or recognize the use of pronouns in language particularly with regard to acknowledging the pronouns that individuals identify with. These three categories are: 1) the traditional pronouns which include the masculine “he” and the feminine “she;” 2) gender neutral pronouns which include the singular “they;” and 3) the neopronoun “ey.” Furthermore, the participants’ level of awareness on the three categories of pronouns was determined and interpreted as Aware (3), Moderately Aware (2), and Not Aware (1).

Table 1 shows the level of awareness on the three categories of pronouns among non-binary college students. As a whole (80 participants), the percentage shows that the non-binary college students are aware of the categories of pronoun with M=2.48 and SD=0.39 (traditional pronouns); M=2.79 and SD 0.25 (gender-neutral pronouns); and M= 2.64 and SD 0.32 (neopronouns).

On the other hand, when the participants are grouped according to sexual orientation and pronouns are separately categorized, a specific observation can be made especially when the pronouns are categorized separately. Table 1 also shows that gays show awareness on the traditional pronouns with M= 2.48 and SD= 0.40. The same conclusion was made for bisexual males with M= 2.48 and SD= 0.40 and bisexual females with M= 2.54 and SD= 0.39. However, among the four sexual orientations, lesbians emerged to have moderate awareness of the traditional pronouns with M= 2.31 and SD= 0.55. This is a notable observation. The traditional pronouns in this study include the masculine pronoun “he” and the feminine pronoun “she.” The researcher theorizes that there could be a number of factors that may have contributed to the numerical results of this part of the study.

As regards, to the participants’ awareness on the gender-neutral pronouns, the results revealed that three among the four sexual orientations were aware of them with lesbians having M= 2.79 and SD= 0.25; bisexual male M= 2.64 and SD= 0.0; bisexual female M= 2.94 and SD= 0.13. Only the gays were moderately aware of the gender neutral pronouns with M= 2.29 and SD= 0.00. All of the sexual orientations indicated awareness of neopronouns. Specifically lesbians with M= 3.00 and SD 0.00; gays with M= 2.46 and 0.34; bisexual males with M= 2.57 and SD= 0.2; and bisexual females with M=2.43 and SD= 0.00.

Table 1

Level of Awareness of the Non-binary College Students on the Three Categories of Pronouns

Sexual Orientation	Traditional Pronouns			Gender-Neutral Pronouns			Neopronouns		
	M	SD	Interpretation	M	SD	Interpretation	M	SD	Interpretation
<i>Entire Group</i>	<i>2.48</i>	<i>0.39</i>	<i>Aware</i>	<i>2.79</i>	<i>0.25</i>	<i>Aware</i>	<i>2.64</i>	<i>0.32</i>	<i>Aware</i>
Lesbian	2.31	0.55	Moderately Aware	2.79	0.25	Aware	3.00	0.00	Aware
Gay	2.48	0.34	Aware	2.29	0.00	Moderately Aware	2.46	0.34	Aware
Bisexual Male	2.48	0.40	Aware	2.64	0.00	Aware	2.57	0.20	Aware
Bisexual Female	2.54	0.39	Aware	2.94	0.13	Aware	2.43	0.00	Aware

In relation to pronoun awareness, pronoun-checking is highlighted by the study of Brown et al. (2020). Pronoun-checking is asking people which pronouns they liked to be used when being referred to. Brown et al. (2019) revealed that a participant allowed the new students to provide their pronouns rather than assuming their pronouns based on their physical look. Furthermore, in the clinical setting, a participant from Brown et al. (2019) indicated that it is critical to start the conversation by asking the patient to use their preferred pronouns. These empirical data align with the level of pronoun awareness of the participants of the current study.

In addition, the work Boyland et al. (2018) on organizational settings concluded that using an employee's gender pronouns in organizational papers is a simple identity-safety cue for LGBTQ+ people. To accommodate LGBTQ+ employees, it is generally

advised that employers encourage all staff members to use their preferred pronouns. Other studies have shown that identity-safety signals, such as pronoun use, can serve as important cues for minorities based on gender and sexual orientation. Specifically, Matsick et al. (2020) found that social media accounts of cisgender women featuring rainbow filters, a recognized pro-LGBTQ+ symbol, enhance perceptions of identity safety among individuals identifying as sexual and gender minorities.

These related studies augment the present results indicating that not only the non-binary college students but also institutions and organizations that are aware of the three categories of pronouns. These may also serve as an indication that non-binary people are aware of the pronouns that may represent them.

3.2 Level of Knowledge on the Three Categories of Pronouns

Aside from the participants' level of awareness, their level of knowledge was also analyzed. The same categories of pronouns were included in this part of the quantitative inquiry. The level of knowledge on the three categories of pronouns relates more to their specific understanding of the types or cases or the three categories of pronouns and their linguistic and grammatical functions. It also indicates knowing the origin and the use of these pronouns in both speech and writing.

Correspondingly, the participants' level of knowledge on the three categories of pronouns revealed parallel results. Table 2 shows the level of knowledge on the categories of pronouns among non-binary college students. As a whole (80 participants), the quantitative data showed that the non-binary college students are knowledgeable of the categories of pronoun with M=2.49 and SD=0.31 (traditional pronouns); M=2.68 and SD=0.23 (gender-neutral pronouns); and M= 2.47 and SD 0.32 (neopronouns).

As far as traditional pronouns are concerned, there is a point of significance that can be drawn out from the study. Non-binary college students have the knowledge of the typical use and concept of the traditional pronouns "he" and "she." This is also revealed in Table 2 indicating all sexual orientation to be knowledgeable of traditional pronouns: lesbians M= 2.58 and SD= 0.28; gays M=2.44 and SD=0.21; bisexual males M= 2.42 and SD= 0.35; and bisexual female M= 2.35 and SD= 0.38. This is mainly because these pronouns are explicitly taught in Philippine schools highlighting a definite rule of using these pronouns. The pronoun "he" is used to refer to a male antecedent, and the pronoun "she" is used to refer to a female antecedent.

Table 2

Level of Knowledge of the Non-binary College Students on the Three Categories of Pronouns

Sexual Orientation	Traditional Pronouns			Gender-Neutral Pronouns			Neopronouns		
	M	SD	Interpretation	M	SD	Interpretation	M	SD	Interpretation
<i>Entire Group</i>	<i>2.42</i>	<i>0.31</i>	<i>Knowledgeable</i>	<i>2.68</i>	<i>0.23</i>	<i>Knowledgeable</i>	<i>2.47</i>	<i>0.32</i>	<i>Knowledgeable</i>
Lesbian	2.58	0.28	Knowledgeable	2.72	0.17	Knowledgeable	2.74	0.00	Knowledgeable
Gay	2.44	0.21	Knowledgeable	2.33	0.00	Moderately Knowledgeable	2.47	0.34	Knowledgeable
Bisexual Male	2.42	0.35	Knowledgeable	2.39	0.08	Knowledgeable	2.17	0.20	Moderately Knowledgeable
Bisexual Female	2.35	0.38	Knowledgeable	2.78	0.27	Knowledgeable	2.22	0.00	Moderately Knowledgeable

Cooks-Campbell (2022) stated that the conventional English usage of "he and/or she" to refer to individuals makes the assumption that gender is binary and that individuals are just either male or female. These pronouns are actually deemed the most common pronouns.

Traditionally, English pronouns used in the Philippines adhere to gender distinctions. Bowman et al. (2023) noted that conventionally, English pronouns indicate the gender of the person referenced. Historically, English provided "he/him/his" for male subjects and "she/her/hers" for female subjects. This traditional approach persists in formal educational settings across schools in the Philippines when teaching English grammar to students.

Moreover, in the Philippine context especially in the academe, the pronoun "they" is generally treated, used, and taught as a plural pronoun. On other hand, this study revealed a different outcome stating that among the four sexual orientations, three sexual orientations specifically lesbian M= 2.72 and SD 0.17, bisexual male M=2.39 and SD= 0.08, and bisexual female M= 2.78

and $SD = 0.27$ were knowledgeable of the singular pronoun "they." The result compliments other empirical studies that indicate the usage of the singular pronoun "they" even ages ago. It can also be noted that among the four sexual orientations, only the gays are moderately knowledgeable of the gender-neutral pronoun $M = 2.33$ and $SD = 0.00$.

When categorized according to sexual orientation, two among the four sexual orientation were knowledgeable of the neopronouns specifically lesbians $M = 2.74$ and $SD = 0.00$, gays $M = 2.47$ and $SD = 0.34$ while bisexual males $M = 2.17$ and $SD = 0.20$ and bisexual females $M = 2.22$ and $SD = 0.00$ were moderately knowledgeable. The results indicate that half of the sample are knowledgeable of the linguistic and grammatical functions of pronouns and the other have adequate knowledge to understand their functions.

As regards to the neopronouns, the participants' level of knowledge can validate the legitimacy of the existence of neopronouns. Research on neopronouns, such as *xe*, *fae*, *ey*, and *ze*, shows that these forms are indeed part of contemporary English variation and have begun to attract sociolinguistic attention among speakers. In a large-scale acceptability judgment study, Rose et al. (2023) found that neopronouns are not judged as wholly ungrammatical by English speakers; rather, they are rated as intermediate in acceptability, falling between clearly ungrammatical forms and canonical third-person singular pronouns like *she*, *he*, and *they*. This indicates that the existence of neopronouns is recognized at some level by many speakers, even if they are still less familiar and less automatically accepted than traditional pronouns.

3.3 Pronoun Preference of Non-Binary College Students

After investigating the level of awareness and the level of knowledge on pronouns by non binary college students, their pronoun preference was analyzed. Three choices were given in the online survey: 1) traditional pronouns (nominative case) "he" and/or "she" (objective case) "him" and/or "her" (possessive case) "his" and/or "his;" 2) gender- neutral pronouns (nominative case) "they" (objective case) "them" (possessive case) "their;" and 3) neopronouns (nominative case) "ey" (objective case) "em," (possessive case) "eir." The participants were asked to rank these pronouns from 1 to 3, with 1 as their most preferred pronoun to use when people refer to them and 3 as their least preferred pronoun to use when people refer to them.

The results reveal that overall, 63.75% or 51 of the respondents prefer to use the traditional pronouns while 23.75% or 19 participants prefer to use gender-neutral pronouns, and 12.50% or 10 participants have the preference for the neopronouns. This means that even if their sexual orientation is beyond the binary options of male and female, these non-binary college students still prefer to use the traditional pronouns. It implies that most of the biologically male non-binary participants still prefer to use the traditional pronoun "he" when people refer to them. At the same time, most of the biologically female non-binary participants still prefer to use the traditional pronoun "she" when people refer to them.

Among those who prefer to use the traditional pronouns, the bisexual male college students emerged with the highest number (17) followed by gay (15) and bisexual female (14). A substantial observation can be made that only (5) lesbian college students prefer to use the traditional pronouns. In fact, the quantitative data shows that out of 19 who prefer to use the gender-neutral pronoun, 12 (60%) lesbian college students prefer to use the gender-neutral pronoun or the singular pronoun "they" when people refer to them.

Among the four sexual orientations, lesbians emerged with the highest rank that prefer to use the gender-neutral pronoun. This was followed by bisexual females with 25% or 5 participants, and bisexual male and gay with both 5% each having only 1 respondent respectively. Lastly, 12.50% or 10 of the participants prefer to use the neopronoun; however, among the four sexual orientations, gay emerged with the highest rank with 20% or 4 participants. Lesbian followed with 15% or 3 participants. Bisexual male came third in the rank with 10% or 2 participants followed by bisexual females with 5% or just 1 participant. On the next page, Table 3 shows the results of preference of pronouns by non-binary college students.

Table 3***Preference of Non-binary College Students on the Three Categories of Pronouns***

Categories	Traditional		Gender-Neutral		Neopronouns	
	F	%	f	%	f	%
Overall	51	63.75	19	23.75	10	12.50
Lesbian	5	25.00	12	60.00	3	15.00
Gay	15	75.00	1	5.00	4	20.00
Bisexual Male	17	85.00	1	5.00	2	10.00
Bisexual Female	14	70.00	5	25.00	1	5.00

It can be noted that despite being aware and knowledgeable of the three categories of pronouns, most of the non-binary college students still prefer to use the traditional pronouns when people refer to them. The results of this study may go along with the study of Meyers (1990) which revealed that 67% of her participants consistently use the generic masculine pronoun "he" in their written productions while 62% of her participants have the consistency in using the singular pronoun "they." In addition, Earp (2012) found that "he" and "he or she" were among the most frequently used pronouns.

In a 2018 study of Lund Eide, it was revealed that 62% of the participants use the singular "they" to avoid revealing their gender identity, while 65% use it to prevent assumptions about their gender identity. The findings of this study contrast with Blankestijn's (2020) research, where it was observed that across various age groups and genders, the singular pronoun "they" was overwhelmingly preferred in both forced-choice and free-response situations for referring to genderless antecedents. Blankestijn (2020) concluded that "they" is frequently used, particularly when antecedents are not explicitly stated.

The results from this study may diverge from Lund Eide's (2018) findings, where approximately 50% of participants expressed willingness to use neopronouns such as "xe," "zie," "ze," and "ey." In contrast, the current study indicates a higher percentage of participants preferring the use of neopronouns. These findings also contrast with Bertulfo's (2019) research in the Philippines, which reported that 45% of third-year Teacher Education English majors believed new pronouns like "ne," "ve," "ey," "xe," and "ze" should be added. Conversely, 25% felt no need to add new pronouns, and 30% were uncertain about the necessity of new pronouns.

On the other hand, this study's result about the low percentage of neopronouns may augment what other recent studies have found out. As a matter of fact, some studies consider neopronoun as merely neologisms (Lund Eide, 2018; McConnell-Ginet, 2013). From the same study of Lund Eide (2018), one of his participants mentioned that the neologisms' (neopronouns') peculiar spellings or letter combinations, as well as their pronunciation, appear to be the main causes of the participant's reluctance to use them. The participant also added that using alternative spellings would provide more pronouns that seem "natural," which could improve their chances of being accepted.

A survey by Hord (2016) with 182 transgender participants revealed that traditional pronouns "he" and "she" are substantially more frequently used than neologistic pronouns. Hord (2016) added that even those who do not identify as belonging to any gender do not employ novel pronouns in "high concentrations." Despite their widespread usage on the internet and the evident linguistic movements, just 1% to 2% of the gender non-conforming participants really used the various neologistic pronouns.

3.4 Sociolinguistic Implications

The findings of this study reveal significant sociolinguistic implications regarding the pronoun awareness, knowledge, and preference of non-binary college students. While participants demonstrated knowledge of various pronoun categories including traditional pronouns, singular "they," and neopronouns, the traditional pronouns "he" and "she" emerged as the most frequently preferred choices. This quantitative result highlights the intersection of societal norms, linguistic ideologies, and cultural practices in shaping pronoun use.

In the Philippine context, the gender of pronouns in local languages is generally uncomplicated. In Tagalog, the singular pronoun *siya* is gender-neutral and used to refer to people regardless of sex or sexual orientation (Carillo, 2018). Similarly, in Hiligaynon, the pronoun *siya* functions in a gender-neutral manner. Despite this, participants may still choose traditional English pronouns due to habitual exposure, unconscious misuse of “he” and “she,” and the additional complexity introduced by singular “they” and neopronouns. This pattern aligns with the traditional-prescriptive linguistic ideology observed in Filipino users of English, as noted by Cadiao (2022), where even gay language teachers in the Philippines favored traditional pronouns over singular “they” or neopronouns.

From a theoretical standpoint, the persistent use of traditional pronouns may reflect limited exposure to or acceptance of gender-inclusive language models in participants’ immediate environments. Applying the Muted Group Theory, non-binary individuals—seen as a marginalized group—may adopt conventional pronouns as a pragmatic strategy to navigate social situations safely and avoid potential prejudice or condemnation. Family expectations, religious affiliations, and societal norms, particularly in a predominantly Catholic country where roughly 90% of the population adheres to Christianity (Nadal, 2011), further influence pronoun choice. For many non-binary Filipinos, using “he” or “she” may be a practical approach to maintain harmony within familial and religious contexts, despite their awareness of alternative pronouns.

Linguistically, introducing novel pronouns faces challenges. Pronouns are function words that encode social information, and changes to established categories often encounter resistance (Bailey et al., 2023). Historically, prescriptive grammarians have opposed alternative epicene pronouns, such as singular “they,” citing grammatical concerns with number agreement (Fowler, 1855, as cited in Watson, 2010). While singular “they” has gained broader acceptance in hypothetical contexts, neopronouns such as “ze/zir” remain less widely adopted, even among progressive individuals (Bradley, 2019). Critics argue that gender-neutral pronouns may introduce ambiguity, as in the sentence “Juan and Lita went out, and they paid,” where it is unclear who performed the action (Leventhal et al., 2020; Prasad & Morris, 2020).

In the Philippine context, where American English norms and prescriptive grammar are highly valued, non-binary students may prefer traditional pronouns despite knowledge of alternatives. These choices reflect a combination of linguistic conservatism, cultural pragmatism, and social navigation strategies. Overall, the preference for “he” and “she” underscores complex interactions among linguistic knowledge, cultural norms, societal expectations, and individual identity in shaping pronoun use among non-binary college students.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the awareness, knowledge, and preference of pronouns among non-binary college students. The findings revealed that participants are generally aware of and knowledgeable about traditional pronouns, gender-neutral pronouns, and neopronouns. However, despite this awareness and knowledge, most participants still prefer traditional pronouns such as “he” and “she.” This suggests that pronoun preference is influenced not only by understanding but also by educational background, cultural norms, and familiarity with language use. The lower preference for gender-neutral pronouns and neopronouns highlights the challenges in adopting newer linguistic forms, particularly in contexts where traditional grammar remains dominant. The study underscores the complex relationship between language, identity, and society, and emphasizes the need for more inclusive language practices in educational settings.

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