

How is the reclamation of slurs perceived in Italian?

A sociolinguistic survey to inform future NLP studies

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Abstract

This study presents a sociolinguistic survey that investigates how the reclamation of LGBT+ slurs is perceived in Italian. Reclamation refers to the practice of repurposing historically derogatory terms into expressions of identity, pride, solidarity, activism. Despite significant advancements in AI in the automatic detection of the abusive use of derogatory terms, the reclamation of slurs remains largely overlooked in NLP research – especially in Italian. Failure to adequately consider the context may lead automated moderation systems to erroneously classify reclaimed slurs as abusive, with the risk of censoring the voices of activists and marginalized communities and limiting their freedom of expression. The survey is based on a web questionnaire designed with input from a preliminary focus group, and it collected both linguistic perceptions and sociodemographic data from 279 respondents. Results show that LGBT+ individuals and younger participants are more familiar with and accepting of reclaimed language. While most respondents agree that ingroup members have greater legitimacy in using reclaimed slurs, opinions vary regarding acceptable contexts and speakers. This underscores the importance of context, intention, and positionality in language interpretation, something that should be taken into account to develop NLP tools that are sensitive enough to deal with reclamatory uses of slurs in the future. Ultimately, this work lays the groundwork for ethical dataset creation and annotation practices that respect marginalized voices, since it supports a community-centered, socially-aware approach to future NLP tools.

1 Introduction

In recent years, language technologies have increasingly focused on understanding and categorizing the granular nuances of language, such as irony (cf. Casola et al. 2024) and sarcasm (cf. Frenda et al. 2022), but also so-called hate speech (cf. Nozza/Bianchi/Attanasio 2022; Malik et al. 2024). Nowadays, it has become urgent to recognize and prevent the spread of offensive messages against different target communities based on gender, sex, sexual orientation, race, religion, language, or political orientation (cf. Guillén-Pacho et al. 2024; Cuccarini et al. 2024). But categorizing hate speech with clear-cut boundaries is hardly possible, and recent Natural Language Processing (NLP) studies emphasize the importance of considering the context to avoid misinterpretations of word meanings (cf. Pamungkas/Basile/Patti 2020, 2023; Holgate et al. 2018), noting that the same swear word can be used both abusively and non-abusively.

The study of hate speech gets even more complex once we take into account the reclamatory uses of slurs, where users (mostly members of the target communities) reclaim derogatory terms to instead express pride, solidarity, camaraderie, or use them as tools for political and social activism – a phenomenon examined across various fields, e. g. philosophy of language (cf. Bianchi 2014; Anderson 2018; Jeshion 2020; Cepollaro/López de Sa 2023), linguistics (cf. Brontsema 2004) and sociolinguistics (cf. Mutlak 2024), experimental psychology (cf. Galinsky et al. 2013; Bianchi et al. 2024).

In computational linguistics – particularly in NLP – the phenomenon remains still underexplored, even more so in Italian. While – as mentioned before – advancements in AI have focused on developing corpora and models to automatically detect the abusive use of derogatory terms in social media texts, very little research in NLP has examined the reclamation of slurs (cf. Zsisku/Zubiaga/Dubossarsky 2024). Despite the need for specific NLP tools to discern reclamatory contexts, to our knowledge, only Cuccarini et al. (2024) have so far explored the Italian context. This research is crucial to avoid mistakenly censoring legal speech in AI-supported content moderation, which could disproportionately harm activists and marginalized users, rather than opening up spaces of representation, ultimately limiting their freedom of expression (cf. Cepollaro/Labinaz 2019). In this context, a current challenge is to collect new fair data suitable for fine-tuning models, and to find a balance between detecting HS and preserving the free dissemination of ideas and opinions.

To pave the way to future NLP research in this direction, we started – in our study – from the investigation of speakers’ perception of reclamatory uses of slurs in Italian. This qualitative study is a preliminary step to gain the necessary knowledge to inform NLP studies on reclamation, and to provide a crucial foundation for developing detection engines that are sensitive to this phenomenon. We disseminated online a sociolinguistic questionnaire on reclamation that consisted of open and closed-ended questions, and contextually collected participants’ socio-demographic data, to gather insights that will strengthen future NLP studies, as highlighted in the conclusions.

This study is part of a broader interdisciplinary body of work aimed at developing a new methodological approach that incorporates well-established social science techniques, with a strong emphasis on participatory methods (cf. Caselli et al. 2021). These techniques actively engage individuals and communities in collaboratively defining the subject of study, ensuring that data collection is both inclusive and ethically sound.

This contribution is structured as follows. In Section 2, we illustrate our theoretical and analytical framework. In Section 3, we describe our study by presenting methods and materials. In Section 4, we report the results, and in Section 5 a brief discussion is presented. Finally, in Section 6, we delineate conclusions and future works.

2 What’s reclamation? The philosophy of language framework

In line with most recent works in philosophy of language, we define reclamation as the linguistic practice in which speakers – usually the members of targeted communities – repurpose the terms historically used to derogate their group, to instead express a sense of belonging and identity, fostering camaraderie, manifesting solidarity and subverting extant structures of

discrimination (cf. Bianchi 2014; Cepollaro/López de Sa 2023; Zsisku/Zubiaga/Dubossarsky 2024). In this work, we will not delve into the many controversies to which reclamation gives rise. Instead, we will briefly mention three theoretical assumptions we make here (borrowed from Cepollaro/López de Sa 2022, 2023).

First, we see reclamation as a very diverse phenomenon that includes not only instances of very conventionalized reclamatory uses (e. g. reclamatory occurrences of *queer*, whose non-derogatory use is widespread), but also novel reclamatory uses that are not (yet) conventionalized or ordinary. In a similar spirit, we take reclamation to include very different contexts of use, e. g. activist contexts where speakers are very aware of the political import of their words, but also more informal and intimate situations, where slurs are used in a friendly and playful manner (cf. Bianchi 2014). Under this broad understanding of reclamation, we leave it open how the semantics and pragmatics of reclamatory uses of slurs are best analyzed (cf. Jusińska 2021).

Second, note that when we deal with reclamation we tend to speak of social **groups** – and more specifically of **ingroup** and **outgroup** speakers. Nevertheless, this is an oversimplification, because no social group is so homogeneous that it can be treated as a monolithic entity (whose members face the same challenges, have the same goals, etc.), not only because the individual psychology of each member of a group (their background, history and personality) makes a huge difference to their interests, goals, and inclinations, but also because – as Crenshaw’s (1989) seminal work has shown – social reality is intersectional. That is, every person who has a sexual orientation also has some gender, ethnic origins, socio-economic status, education, and so on, and the various axes of oppression (e. g. ethnicity, class, gender, etc.) are not unconnected, but interact in a way that creates distinctive kinds of social identities that come with distinctive challenges. So, for instance, the experience of what it is like to be gay (and what it is like to face homophobia) is not the same for all gay individuals, but varies, among other factors, along their gender, social class, education, etc. (cf. Lykke 2010; Esposito/Pérez-Arredondo/Zottola 2024). In this sense, it is an oversimplification to talk about “the LGBT+ community” as if it were one uniform entity. In this work, we accept and adopt this way of talking for the sake of simplicity. But, as we shall see, we also adopted the lens of intersectionality in analyzing how participants’ gender, sexual orientation, and age, among other things, interact when it comes to assessing the practice of reclamation.

Third, most views within and outside of the academic debate, assume **targetism**, i. e. the idea that only ingroups – i. e. members of target communities – reclaim slurs. In this work, instead of just taking targetism for granted, we investigated how participants feel about how the identity of the speaker changes the perception of reclaimed uses of slurs. In particular, following Cepollaro/López de Sa (2022), we distinguish between **belonging** to the target communities (e. g. being gay makes one belong to the LGBT+ community) and **being appropriately related** to it (e. g. being an ally who fights for LGBT+ rights can make one appropriately related to the community, without necessarily belonging to it).

3 Our study

3.1 Background

As highlighted before, few linguistic studies address the reclamation of slurs in the Italian context. For our study, we relied on Cuccarini et al. (2024), here briefly presented. Due to the lack of annotated datasets on this topic, Cuccarini and colleagues (2024) used the HODI dataset (cf. Nozza et al. 2023), an Italian dataset of homotransphobia detection, composed of sentences directed against LGBT+ community who are target of homotransphobia, assuming that in this corpus slurs could appear in both abusive and reclamatory contexts. To filter relevant tweets, they selected homotransphobic slurs using HurtLex, a multilingual lexicon of derogatory terms (cf. Bassignana/Basile/Patti 2018). They refined the list based on Bianchi's (2014, 2015) definition of slurs, excluding non-derogatory words like *gay* and *omosessuale*. This process resulted in a list of 17 target slurs, including *frocio*, *culattone*, *finocchio*, *ricchione*, and *troia*, through which they collected 1742 tweets from the HODI dataset. The researchers then conducted an annotation task using a binary classification system, involving three expert annotators to determine whether the slurs were used in a derogatory or reclaimed context. Throughout this process, they faced ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding who has the authority to define which terms can be reclaimed and who is entitled to use them.

This background led us to conclude that such a complex linguistic phenomenon should be addressed by directly and actively involving the target community. The sociolinguistic survey we present was designed for this purpose.

3.2 Preliminaries: pilot focus group

In order to design our web questionnaire, a preliminary sociolinguistic work was made. We conducted a pilot focus group interview, which involved 4 participants from the LGBT+ community and where – among the diverse stimuli – some sentences extracted from Cuccarini et al. (2024) were used. The focus group gave us useful insights to build up our questionnaire and investigate on a larger scale the reclamation of slurs, with the aim of collecting opinions and perceptions of the phenomenon not only intercepting the target community, but also spreading it – through our academic and personal networks – among the general Italian population.

Based on the interaction with members of focus group, ten sentences¹ were selected from Cuccarini et al. (2024)'s dataset, where a binary annotation determined whether each sentence as produced in a context of reclamation [R] or non-reclamation [Not-R]. The sentences were

¹ This selection includes a very interesting example (item (B) below), showing how reclaimed slurs can display morphological atypicalities. In particular, the term *frocia*, constitutes a feminine and innovative modification of the homophobic slur targeting gay men (the masculine *frocio*), possibly signaling—through morphological transformation—that the slur is being reclaimed. Cf. Nossem (2019) about the subversive potential of this morphological transformation (“[...] the gender-markedness of *frocio* precludes any possibility of using the slur against women. On the other hand, though, it is exactly this gender marker that opens up a new subversive potential that is unavailable to the English ‘queer’, namely its new construction as a female-gendered version” (Nossem 2019: 19). In contrast, Pepponi (2024) claims that the feminine morphology is perfectly compatible with derogatory uses of the term; instead, she distinguishes between adnominal and adjectival uses of *frocia*, claiming that its adnominal uses preserve their derogatory power, while the adjectival uses are more likely to be reclamatory.

used as inputs in the questionnaire and evenly distributed between R and Not-R but in random order so that respondents could not identify patterns. Here, four examples of the input sentences are presented, where (A) and (B) had been annotated as R, while (C) and (D) as Not-R.

- (1) *Fra siamo letteralmente gay, posso usare le parole **frocio** finocchio e ricchione, nessuno l3 usa più come insulti, dovresti aggiornarti un attimo che siamo 2022*
 [‘Bro, we are literally gay, I can use the words **queer**, faggot, and poof, no one uses them as insults anymore, you should update yourself that’s 2022’]
- (2) *Allora posso dirti per la parte non cishet e io ho trovato un lavoro, anzi me ne sono stati offerti anche. Coi capelli viola corti e visibilmente **frocia**. Come al solito hanno fatto speculazioni alle mie spalle ma il lavoro me lo hanno dato. Però conta che vivo a milano e+*
 [‘So, I can tell you for the non-cishet part, and I found a job, actually I even got multiple offers. With short purple hair and visibly **dyke**. As usual people speculated behind my back, but I still got the job. But keep in mind, I live in Milan and+’]
- (3) *Bro ma ti rendi conto che così pari solo un succhiacazzi per quell’altro **frocio** 😂*
 [‘Bro, do you realize you just sound like a cock-sucker for that other queer? 😂’]
- (4) *Un po’ come quando tra gay si chiamano “finocchio”, “**frocio**” o “ricchione”. Lo dicessi io sarei un omofobo*
 [Kind of like when gay people call each other “**faggot**” “queer” or “poof”. If I say it, I’d be a homophobe]

3.3 The sociolinguistic survey

A sociolinguistic survey is a structured investigation that aims at involving a representative sample of people (cf. Milroy/Gordon 2008; Schleeff 2014). In our study, it represents a useful technique able to activate the metalinguistic competence of the person to whom the questionnaire is proposed and obtain both socio-demographic and linguistic-perceptual insights, without neglecting self-identification information. The choice to engage a sociolinguistic survey is led by both a broad and a specific objective.

From a methodological perspective, the validity of our work is closely connected with the issue of positionality, and this represents the broader aim of our study. Possessing a solid understanding of the general observations that emerge from the sociolinguistic study enables the single researcher or research group to make more informed and intentional decisions, grounded in both empirical data and human considerations. This facilitates a stronger cognizance of their own biases which could act along the next steps of the computational pipeline, avoiding the risk of relying unwittingly on choices determined by default methodological assumptions or personal intuitions. It is essential that the researcher critically reflects on and explicitly articulates their positionality, as this awareness significantly influences the research design, data interpretation, and the conclusions drawn.

More specifically, the implementation of this technique serves as a valuable tool for informing subsequent stages of the study, and its aim is two-folded. First, analyzing the results of the questionnaire provides researchers more awareness in determining which sources are more adequate for the data collection, as it suggests what is made relevant by the participants involved, through the reasoning of how diverse participants see and relate to the topic. Then, by identifying variations in opinions across different demographic groups, the survey facilitates the selec-

tion of the most suitable group of annotators, thereby enhancing the reliability and relevance of the collected data.

3.3.1 Methods: participants and materials

Our survey was conducted through the dissemination of a self-administered web questionnaire which was realized with Google form and consisted of 4 sections. The first 2 sections presented the input sentences. In the first section, participants were asked to evaluate each sentence based on its context, perceived offensiveness, and whether it conveyed hate. The second section focused on a single word within the input sentences, and participants were asked whether it was a reclamatory use of the word and whether they would use it in a similar context. In the third section, participants were asked about their general experience with reclamatory language, its legitimacy, and their personal use of such language. The final section gathered socio-demographic details, including age, gender identity, sexual orientation, education, and their connection to the LGBT+ community. Participants could choose among different options of gender identity and sexual orientation, and they could add yet further answers in addition to the ones we provided. This was crucial to ensure the possibility to self-determine one's gender and sexual identity.

While a thorough and complete analysis of the entire survey will be presented in future works, in this contribution we focus on the third section², as it is devoted to exploring how reclamation, its incidence, and its legitimacy are perceived in the Italian context. This gives us interesting insights into how participants perceive reclaimed uses of slurs. The questions analyzed are reported below. For ease of reference in the discussion, we assign each item a capitalized analytical label that summarises the specific research question motivating it:

a) **“Perceived Exposure” question:**

Nella tua esperienza quotidiana ti capita o ti è capitato di sentire usi di linguaggio riappropriativo simile a quello proposto negli esempi sopra?

[‘In your daily experience, do you or have you ever heard reclamatory uses of language similar to those proposed in the examples above?’]

b) **“Legitimacy” question:**

Ritieni legittimo l'utilizzo di tali parole o espressioni in termini riappropriativi da parte di: (Puoi indicare più di una risposta)

[‘You consider the use of such words or expressions legitimate in a reclamatory way by: (You can indicate more than one answer)’]

c) **“Use” question:**

In generale, a te capita o è capitato di utilizzare parole o espressioni con intento riappropriativo?

[‘Do you happen or have you ever happened to use words or expressions with a reclamatory intent?’]

² This section included two further items in addition to the three we discuss in this paper; one invited participants to mention further reclaimed words they know about; and one, which was optional, gathered their general comments about the phenomenon of reclamation. Here we present only the ones that are directly linked to the three issues about reclamation we want to address here. A complete account of the survey will be presented and discussed in future works.

“Perceived Exposure” and “Use” were “Yes/No” questions (with a third “Not sure” option). Legitimacy question, instead, was a checklist (multiple choice allowed):

- *Chiunque* [‘Anyone’]
- *Persone LGBT+* [‘LGBT+ individuals’]
- *Persone o gruppi che fanno attivismo LGBT+* [‘Individuals or groups engaged in LGBT+ activism’]
- *Rete amicale di persone LGBT+* [‘LGBT+ individuals’ circle of friends’]
- *Familiari di persone LGBT+* [‘Family members of LGBT+ individuals’]
- *Persone del mondo dello spettacolo e dell'intrattenimento (TV, spettacoli comici, teatro etc.)* [‘People in the entertainment industry (TV, comedy, theater, etc.)’]
- *Persone del mondo dell'arte e della letteratura (libri, cinema, serie tv, etc.)* [‘People in the art and literature world (books, cinema, TV series, etc.)’]
- *Nessuna persona* [‘No one’]

These options reflect notions that are commonly employed in the literature, such as that of ingroup members of the LGBT+ community. But they also allow subtler distinctions by referring to individuals who are **close** to the LGBT+ community (friends and family networks). Moreover, in addition to investigating **who** can reclaim slurs, based on their identity, these options also investigate which contexts are especially suited to employ slurs in reclamatory ways (such as TV shows, comedy, theatre, but also books, movies, etc).

These items together explore respondents’ exposure to reclamatory language, and provide insights into their perceptions and opinions about its legitimacy across different groups, as well as their own use of reclamatory language.

The questionnaire was filled by a total of 279 individuals, gathering perspectives from participants of different ages, and geographical and cultural backgrounds. We clustered as ingroups (LGBT+ individuals) people that at least in one of the two dimensions declared a category that we consider part of the LGBT+ community. In total, they were 132 (47.3%) out of 279, of whom 35 were cisgender men (26.5%), 73 cisgender women (55.3%) and 24 representing other gender identities or not declared identities (18.1%). Among the group, 33 of them defined themselves as gay (25%) and 22 as lesbian (16.7%), while 77 declared other orientations (58.3%), mostly falling into the umbrella term of *bisessuale* [‘bisexual’]. 15 participants explicitly declared an identity out of the man/woman binarism.

Then, we considered outgroups (i. e. non-LGBT+ individuals): men and women who defined themselves as cisgender and heterosexual. They were 136 respondents (48.8% of the total sample), of whom 101 women (74.3%) and 35 men (25.7%).

Finally, 11 participants out of 279 (3.9%) did not self-identify at all or identified only along one of the two dimensions – identity/orientation – or provided other responses such as *libera* [‘free’], *innamorata* [‘in love’] or *persona* [‘person’]: therefore we decided that these responses were not clear enough for us to place them into one of the two groups.

As for the sociodemographic data collected, in terms of age, the majority of respondents (45.5%) were between 25 and 34 years old, followed by 22.6% in the 35–44 age group. The remaining participants were fairly evenly distributed across the other age groups: 7.5% were

aged 18–24, 9% were 45–54, and 9.3% were 55–64. Finally, the smallest group (6.1%) comprised individuals aged 65 and older. The age distribution between the LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ groups shows notable differences, with the LGBT+ group being younger, with a strong concentration in the 25–44 age range (79.5% in total), whereas the non-LGBT+ group having a more evenly distributed age range, with a substantial presence of older individuals.

Regarding geographical distribution, all participants were Italian native speakers, and all of them grew up in Italy, except for one. With regard to the current region of residence in Italy, most survey participants live in the North (64.5%), followed by the South and the islands (21.2%). Only 9.3% of them live in central regions of Italy, while 5% currently live abroad. The regional distribution of the two groups highlights some differences. Both participants from the LGBT+ and the non-LGBT+ groups mostly live in the North (ingroups 69.7%, outgroups 60.3%). However, a significantly larger proportion of outgroups were from the South and the islands (26.5%), nearly doubling the ingroups' percentage (13.6%). This suggests a stronger representation from these regions among the outgroups. The presence of people living abroad is generally scarce, but still almost twice as high among ingroups (6.8%) compared to outgroups (3.7%). The Centre has a nearly identical distribution in both groups, with 9.8% for ingroups and 9.6% for outgroups.

4 Results

Analyzing the data, we are interested in studying how ingroups and outgroups responded. Age also emerges as an interesting trait to analyze from this perspective.

4.1 The “Perceived Exposure” question

Analyzing the responses in relation to age groups, we observed that individuals aged 55 and older are more likely to answer “No” to the question: “Nella tua esperienza quotidiana ti capita o ti è capitato di sentire usi di linguaggio riappropriativo simile a quello proposto negli esempi sopra?” [‘In your daily experience, do you or have you ever heard reclamatory uses of language similar to those proposed in the examples above?']. To determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the different categories, we conducted a Chi-square test of independence (see Table 1). The higher prevalence of negative responses among individuals aged 55–64 and older appears to be statistically significant. In contrast, the responses from the other age groups are more evenly distributed and differences do appear to be not statistically significant.

Parameters	χ^2	Degrees of Freedom	p-values
Age and perceived exposure to reclamatory terms	21.394	10	0.018
Ingroups/outgroups and exposure to reclamatory terms	21.920	2	0.001

Table 1: Results of the chi-square tests conducted on age and belonging to a group for the “Perceived Exposure” question

With respect to differences in responses between ingroup and outgroup individuals, the collected data suggest that members of the LGBT+ community are more likely to use words in a reclamatory context than outgroup respondents (see Chart 1). As for participants' age, the data reveals that the LGBT+ community is disproportionately represented by younger individuals, particularly those in the 25–34 and 35–44 age categories, where the percentages of affirmative responses are notably higher. Conversely, outgroups show a more even distribution across the age spectrum, with a substantial proportion of older individuals (particularly those aged 55–64 and 65+) providing affirmative responses. This age-related divergence suggests that age identity may intersect with social identity in a way that shapes response patterns.

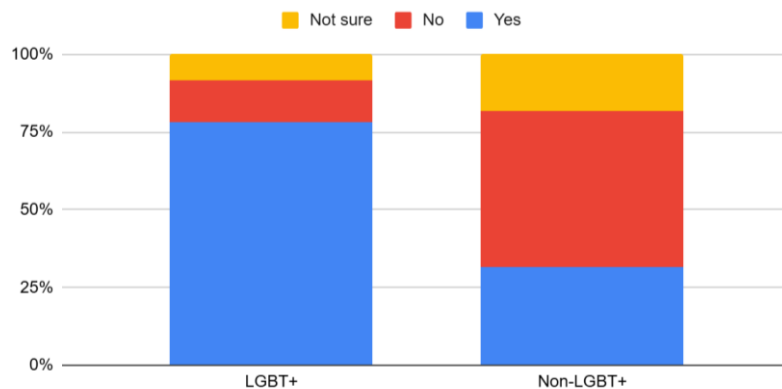


Chart 1: Distribution of responses to the “Perceived Exposure” question, comparing ingroup and outgroup participants

The two groups also differ in terms of their geographical distribution. Ingroups have a higher percentage of affirmative responses from the North (69.5%; outgroups: 56.6%) and Abroad (7.0%; outgroups: 4.7%), while the outgroups have a larger percentage of affirmative responses from the South and Islands (27.4%) compared to ingroups (13.3%). Additionally, outgroups have a slightly higher percentage of affirmative responses from the Centre (11.3%) compared to the ingroups (10.2%).

4.2 The “Legitimacy” question

To study the results of the “Ritieni legittimo l'utilizzo di tali parole o espressioni in termini riappropriativi da parte di: (Puoi indicare più di una risposta)” [‘You consider the use of such words or expressions legitimate in a reclamatory way by: (You can indicate more than one answer)’] – as it was a checklist with multiple selections and an open-ended answer – in order to assess the most explicit and firm responses, we distinguished between single and multiple responses (see Chart 2), and counted participants who gave a single response (“Persone LGBT+” [‘LGBT+ individuals’], “Chiunque” [‘Anyone’] or “Nessuna persona” [‘No one’], see Chart 3) separately from those who selected multiple options. Among the latter, we distinguished between those who legitimized only individuals connected to the LGBT+ community (e. g. “Persone o gruppi che fanno attivismo LGBT+” [‘Individuals or groups engaged in LGBT+ activism’], “Rete amicale di persone LGBT+” [‘LGBT+ individuals’ circle of friends’], “Familiari di persone LGBT+” [‘Family members of LGBT+ individuals’]) and those who also recognized its use in the entertainment industry and/or in the art and literature world.

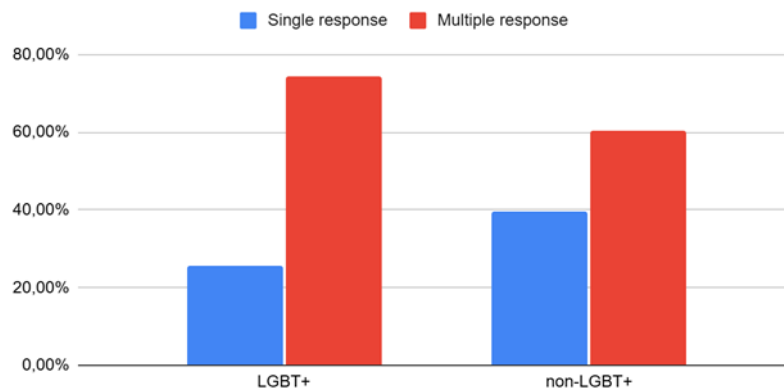


Chart 2: Distribution of single versus multiple responses to the “Legitimacy” question, comparing ingroup and outgroup participants

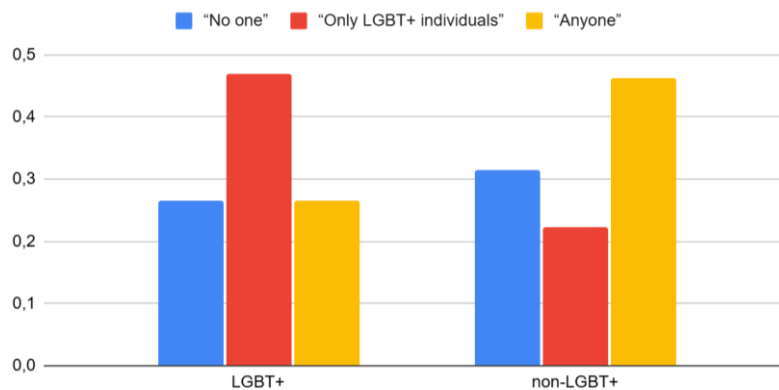


Chart 3: Detailed distribution of responses within the single-response category for the “Legitimacy” question, comparing ingroup and outgroup participants

Within the LGBT+ group, 34 individuals (25.7%) provided a single response. A small subset of these respondents (26.5%) firmly stated that no one should be allowed to use the terms in question. A larger portion (47%) believed that only members of the LGBT+ community should have this right. Within this group, some provided additional clarifications, emphasizing, for example, the importance of reclamation as a concept:

- (1) *altrimenti come regge la definizione di “riappropriazione” che è stata presentata? “l'utilizzo di termini dispregiativi per esprimere la PROPRIA identità e/o l'appartenenza ad una certa comunità”*

[‘otherwise, how does the definition of “reclamation” that was presented hold up? “the use of derogatory terms to express ONE’S OWN identity and/or belonging to a certain community”’]

A respondent highlighted that legitimacy should be limited to LGBTQ+ individuals who have a strong sense of self-acceptance and do not project internalized negativity onto others.

In the rest of the exclusive responses (26.5%), respondents took the opposite stance, affirming that anyone should be allowed to use these terms, but 2 of them highlighted an important caveat, namely that usage should not be offensive.

The majority of LGBT+ participants (98 individuals, 74.3%) provided multiple responses for more nuanced considerations of legitimacy. All of them recognized the right to use certain terms within a restricted circle – typically composed of LGBT+ individuals and their close allies. However, within this group, 19 respondents extended legitimacy beyond this sphere to include the contexts of entertainment and/or art and literature. Some of their justifications highlight the complexities of this issue:

- (2) *Chiunque riesca ad utilizzare determinate parole ma un contesto ironico. Non persone quali professori, istituzioni pubbliche ecc*
 [‘Anyone who can use certain words but an ironic context. Not people such as teachers, public institutions etc.’]

A respondent emphasized that usage should be reserved for personal contexts or people with whom the topic has been directly discussed.

A particularly relevant distinction was drawn between fictional characters and their authors. Some argued that while certain language might be appropriate for characters in books or films, this does not automatically grant legitimacy to the creators of these works. Other responses introduced a further condition: legitimacy within the artistic and literary domains was sometimes seen as contingent on the identity of the speaker. For example, some participants felt that only queer individuals within these fields should have the right to use such language.

Finally, some responses indicated that acceptability depended not only on the speaker but also on the communicative intent. A few respondents suggested that these terms could be used within artistic or entertainment settings, provided their meaning is explicit and not open to misinterpretation:

- (3) *Penso che tutti possano utilizzarle se il tono non è dispregiativo ma anzi riappropriativo, ovviamente nel mondo dello spettacolo, arte ecc ecc è necessario che ciò sia esplicito e non fraintendibile dal pubblico*
 [‘I think everyone can use them as long as the tone is not derogatory but rather reclamatory, obviously, in the world of entertainment, art etc. it is necessary for this to be explicit and not open to misinterpretation by the audience’]

Similarly, others emphasized that artistic and literary use should serve educational or activist purposes, rather than being employed in a way that could cause harm.

Within the non-LGBT+ group, 54 individuals (39.7%) provided exclusive responses. The distribution of these responses reveals a slightly different pattern compared to the LGBT+ group. 31.5% of them stated that no one should be allowed to use these terms. One individual further justified their stance by arguing that such words should be avoided altogether due to their inherently vulgar nature.

Meanwhile, 22.2% felt that only LGBT+ individuals should be allowed to use them. One respondent specified that they would also allow usage in a protected context.

Interestingly, the most frequently selected exclusive response was *chiunque* [‘anyone’] (46.3%). 9 of the participants who gave this response explained their perspective. Some emphasized the importance of depoliticizing or neutralizing the derogatory connotations of these

terms. Others framed legitimacy in terms of intent and mutual understanding, highlighting that usage should not be offensive and that context and consent are crucial:

- (4) *Chiunque purché ci sia consenso da ambo le parti e sia chiaro il modo in cui viene usato un dato termine.*

[‘Anyone, provided there is mutual consent and clarity in how a given term is used.’]

Some participants took a more pragmatic approach, acknowledging that while in principle anyone should be able to use these terms, their use carries social consequences:

- (5) *Chiunque può farlo, bisogna solo valutare le conseguenze. Permettere o vietare l'uso di parole, che potrebbero essere definite dispregiative, ad una comunità piuttosto che ad un'altra, potrebbe non essere la soluzione. Bisogna più educare all'uso dei termini e consapevolizzare il loro significato. Informare per eliminare l'ignoranza, perché il rifiuto, la paura, la fobia è spesso alimentata da ignoranza e pregiudizi. Solo con queste basi sarà possibile limitare o concedere l'uso di linguaggio e/o termini.*

[‘Anyone can do it, one must just consider the consequences. Allowing or prohibiting the use of words, which could be considered derogatory, to one community rather than another may not be the right solution. Instead, we should focus on educating people on the use of these words and raising awareness of its meaning. Informing means eliminating ignorance, because refusal, fear, phobia are often fueled by ignorance and prejudices. Only by paving the way in this sense will it be possible to limit or allow the use of certain language and/or terms.’]

Finally, one response rejected the idea that these words belong exclusively to the LGBT+ community while maintaining a neutral stance toward their use:

- (6) *Ciascuno può parlare come crede, certamente questi termini riappropriativi non sono appannaggio della sola comunità LGBT+. Personalmente, non le trovo gradevoli ma non mi disturbano nemmeno.*

[‘Everyone can speak as they choose, surely these reclaimed terms are not the exclusive property of the LGBTQ+ community. Personally, I don’t find them appealing, but they don’t bother me either.’]

A large proportion of the non-LGBT+ participants (60.3%) provided multiple responses, allowing for a more flexible interpretation of legitimacy (to a lesser extent than what we observed for LGBT+, where the 74.3% opted for multiple responses). Similarly to the LGBT+ group, most participants in this category acknowledged that some degree of legitimacy should be reserved for a restricted circle, typically those closely associated with the LGBT+ community. However, within this group, the legitimacy of using these terms in artistic and entertainment contexts appeared to hold a different significance. In total, 14 participants specifically referenced art and entertainment as legitimate domains for usage, with a few explicitly articulating their reasoning. One participant underscored the importance of context, arguing that the meaning of these terms shifts depending on how they are used in artistic or performative spaces:

- (7) *Una precisazione: per spettacolo e arte il contesto di utilizzo fa tutta la differenza.*

[‘A clarification: in entertainment and art, the context of usage makes all the difference.’]

Another response reinforced the idea that humor or performative intent could make certain usages more acceptable – but only if executed thoughtfully:

- (8) *Chiunque lo faccia con chiaro intento positivo, di supporto, o comico (ma comico fatto bene, non Pio ed Amedeo).*

[‘Anyone who uses them with a clear positive, supportive, or comedic intent (but comedic in a well-crafted way, not like Pio and Amedeo³).’]

5 respondents restricted their approval to art and literature specifically. Notably, one respondent combined the response “Nessuna persona” [‘No one’] with an exception for artistic and literary settings, and that highlights the complexity of individual perspectives.

Finally, a few participants reflected on the broader ethical considerations involved, advocating for a balance between free expression and sensitivity to others:

- (9) *In generale va usato il “buon senso”, ossia usare la terminologia riappropriativa senza ledere la sensibilità delle persone coinvolte. Non è facile, ma basta un po' di tatto e sapersi adattare al contesto in cui ci si trova.*

[‘In general, common sense should be applied – that is, using reclamatory terminology without harming the sensitivities of those involved. It’s not easy, but a bit of tact and adaptability to the context can go a long way.’]

4.3 The Use question

For the question “In generale, a te capita o è capitato di utilizzare parole o espressioni con intent riappropriativo?” [‘Do you happen or have you ever happened to use words or expressions with a reclamatory intent?’], the results reveal a significant difference between LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ participants in their reported use of reclaimed language (see Chart 4). Among LGBT+ respondents, the vast majority (78%) stated that they have used such terms at some point, while only 13.6% reported never having done so. A small percentage (8.3%) was uncertain. In contrast, responses from the non-LGBT+ group showed a much lower engagement with reclaimed language. Only about 32% indicated they had used these terms, while half of the group (50%) explicitly stated they had never done so. A notable 18.4% were unsure, suggesting a degree of ambiguity or lack of awareness regarding what constitutes reclamatory usage. Age was not highly significant as for the Perceived Exposure question, but still relevant, as, for example, we observed a similar tendency for individuals aged 55 and older to respond “No” (see Table 2).

Parameters	χ^2	Degrees of Freedom	p-values
Age and use of reclamatory terms	11.678	10	0.307
Ingroups/outgroups and use of reclamatory terms	59.603	2	0.001

Table 2: Results of the chi-square tests conducted on age and belonging to a group for the Use question

The data strongly suggest that reclaimed language is far more commonly used within the LGBT+ community, where it appears to hold personal and communal significance. For non-

³ Pio and Amedeo are an Italian comedy duo known for their controversial and often provocative humor. Their style frequently polarizes audiences, as it mixes satire with politically incorrect jokes that some consider in poor taste.

LGBT+ individuals, there seems to be more hesitation, possibly due to uncertainty about the appropriateness of using these terms or a lack of personal connection to their reclamatory meaning.

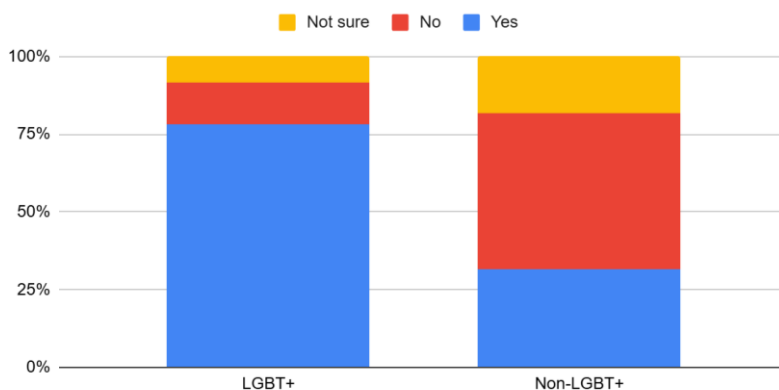


Chart 4: Distribution of responses to the Use question, comparing ingroup and outgroup participants

In summary, the findings reinforce the idea that reclaimed language is an important linguistic tool within LGBT+ communities, while its use outside these circles appears more limited and cautious.

5 Discussion

In this study, we investigated the “Perceived Exposure”, the “Legitimacy”, and the “Use” questions.

As for the “Perceived Exposure” question, the findings suggest that not only being part of the LGBT+ community but also age plays an important role in determining exposure to and usage of reclamatory language. Older individuals and non-LGBT+ respondents show lower exposure, while younger individuals and LGBT+ respondents report higher awareness of such phenomenon. Additionally, geographical differences indicate that social and cultural contexts could influence how reclamatory language is perceived and used; however, a deeper analysis of the geographical information – including the geographical background – is needed, even if we are aware that the participation in the survey does not coherently represent the Italian demographics, as, for example, the Northern regions here are more represented.

As for the “Legitimacy” question, our findings support the idea that ingroups are perceived as the best suited people when it comes to reclamation. But they also speak against a dogmatic version of targetism, suggesting that other people, such as allies, can reclaim slurs, and that certain contexts, such as artistic ones, are especially congenial to reclamatory uses of slurs. What is particularly interesting in our data is that we gathered open answers that allowed for explanations and clarifications and what emerged – and will be further discussed in our future works – is the relevance of context, intention and appropriateness, three concepts that are acknowledged to be pivotal in the definition of reclamation and its characteristics.

As for the “Use” question, the answers give a clearer idea of the use of reclamation language between the two groups, with the ingroups being much more likely to employ reclamatory expressions; at the same time, they open up to a reflection which concerns the complexity of practices, suggesting that they can be carried out in specific contexts even if there is no

awareness. It is clear from the results of the “Legitimacy” question that such a complexity deals with the individual psychology of each member of a group, and their personal perceptions and opinions, which we wanted to frame, by being aware of how they can be changing and not always coherent.

6 Conclusion and future works

Based on the analysis presented here, we gathered essential information for conducting a fair and community-centered data collection and annotation. The results of the questionnaire – given that this is a preliminary study – do not provide sufficient elements to offer complete and detailed guidelines for those approaching the study of this phenomenon. However, they do highlight certain aspects that are particularly relevant to our research objectives. Regarding the insights for the data collection, both the focus group and survey revealed the importance of legitimacy and context in determining whether a term has been reclaimed. This will inform a novel dataset creation, where selection of messages will be based on the identification of clear elements related to the LGBT+ sphere, such as emojis or hashtags supporting love or human rights, pronouns, gender identity or sexual orientation in nicknames and profiles, and the role of first-person speech to explicitly express the belonging to LGBT+ community.

Moreover, the emerging role of age in shaping language perception will be taken into account when selecting data sources, carefully investigating the inclusion of conversations from different social networks based also on this dimension. Finally, the annotation process will be shaped and informed by results of the survey, especially concerning a careful selection of annotators with various and known sociodemographic traits, in line with perspectivist approaches on NLP (cf. Frenda et al. 2024).

On a broad sense, the implementation of this survey has given us the confirmation that by taking into account the intersections identified as relevant in the questionnaire, we have gained specific awareness that enables us to control not only for variables but, more importantly, for our own biases in subsequent steps – particularly in the next phase of annotation. This holds true whether the annotation will be both carried out by a small group and on a larger scale (e. g. using platforms such as *Prolific*, online platform for crowdsourcing annotation). In both cases, this approach is valuable: either for the targeted selection of sociodemographic profiles that will be pre-selected as annotators, or for large-scale annotation campaigns where profiles are not pre-selected, and all annotations are retained with the aim of later analysis. This subsequent analysis may help to identify and confirm annotation patterns from a perspectivist standpoint and ultimately give us a community-centered socially-aware direction which will help us to treat such a sensitive topic in the fairest way we can.

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