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Un/belonging identities: relating narratives of queer trauma

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Un/belonging identities: relating narratives of queer trauma

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Editorial: Un/belonging identities: relating narratives of queer trauma

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queer (LGBTQ), trauma, victimization, (un)belonging, crime, education, heteronormativity, hostile environment

Editorial on the Research Topic
Un/belonging identities: relating narratives of queer trauma

Introduction

In this Research Topic of *Frontiers in Sociology, Gender, Sex and Sexualities*, the materiality of complex trauma, as encountered and experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, is articulated across 16 papers that address cultural landscapes of queer citizenship and draw on how binary architectures of meaning get reproduced through the grammar of (hetero)cultural narratives. The growth of inequality, evidenced in the spread of LGBTQIA+ hate crimes, is rapidly becoming a dialectical re-engagement with the concepts and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Heteronormative practices of *being* and *belonging* habitually operate as a site of power and privilege that can make queer bodies feel "out of place". The authors in this Research Topic draw upon a spectrum of onto-epistemic violences, linguistically performed and physically aimed at queer bodies with the aim of reproducing articulations of (dis)connectedness and discomfort. Such weaponization brings to the fore the haunting presence of traumatic (dis)affection as a form of world and self-making.

As a collective of queer academics, we recognize that we occupy a relatively privileged position which provides us with the opportunity to undertake research that, we hope, will advance social justice. However, trauma and discrimination are integrated into our daily lives. Although we are thriving, we continue to experience trauma. Queer trauma is multilayered and complex (Weststrate et al., 2024; Wrigley and Koumentaki). It is rooted in socially manufactured heterosexist and cisgendered discourses that regulate the way people think, speak, and act. Microaggressions, discrimination, and other forms of oppression are experienced both individually and collectively—they are pervasive. Oppressive social policies and attacks on LGBTQIA+ rights globally have created "queer battle fatigue" (Morris et al., 2022; Wozolek et al., 2015) and perpetuated stigma and shame. The HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, which positioned queer people as a contagion, is a powerful example of how wicked narratives are spread, resulting in collective trauma. Across the world, queer people have experienced a long history of

individual and collective trauma due to being criminalized, mocked, silenced, tortured, and killed. For some, these appalling atrocities against LGBTQIA+ communities are unfortunately woven into the fabric of their daily lives (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). As researchers, we cannot stand by, watch this happen, and remain silent. We have a duty to use our voices to amplify those voices that have been silenced.

Overview of the edited Research Topic

This edited volume brings together a diverse range of original research articles, conceptual analyses, perspectives, community case studies, and autoethnographic accounts that collectively interrogate queer trauma and un/belonging identities across cultural, educational, and social contexts. The Research Topic is deliberately transnational, drawing from a wide variety of geographical locations and cultural experiences, including India, Vietnam, South Africa, Norway, Australia, the Dominican Republic, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as transnational and diasporic communities. This breadth allows the volume to situate queer trauma not as a singular phenomenon but as one that is experienced, mediated, and resisted differently across local, national, and global contexts.

In *Interrogating global narratives of trans queerness. Well-being and agency? Or more stories of trans trauma?*, *Vicars and Milenkovic* situate contemporary anti-trans discourses within a psycho-social tapestry of collective trauma, foregrounding the urgent need for trauma-informed understandings of trans life worlds. *Criminalised, victimised or other? A reflexive engagement with Queer Criminology utilising a relational pedagogical approach* (Wrigley and Koumentaki) considers how queer criminology and relational pedagogy unsettle binary constructions of victimhood and criminalization, opening space for more complex understandings of trauma in queer lives. *Experiences of trans women who have undergone gender affirmation surgery: a constructivist grounded theory* (Dharsheni and Sivakami) examines the lived experiences of trans women in Chennai who have undergone both traditional and medicalized forms of gender affirmation surgery, revealing the entanglement of cultural practices, stigma, and resilience. Complementing this, *Life experiences leading to the choice of surgery—A qualitative study exploring reasons behind the choice of undergoing gender affirmative surgery* (Bjørnson and Sagbakken) offers a Norwegian perspective that underscores how socio-cultural norms and enacted stigma shape the decision-making processes of individuals pursuing gender-affirming surgeries. A different vantage point is depicted in *Please don't gayify!: an autoethnographic account of medicalised relationality for LGBTQI+ safe affirming medical health education and clinical practice* (Vicars and Deppeler), which narrates encounters with health professionals and medical training contexts to expose systemic inadequacies in LGBTQI+ inclusive healthcare.

Toward promoting resilience of gender and sexually diverse youth in South African rural school ecologies (Zhange and Mohangi) examines the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in rural schools, demonstrating how teacher support and inclusive practices can foster resilience despite systemic heteronormativity and limited resources. *Building a model of navigational strategies for queer undergraduate students in STEM* (Voigt et al.) offers a cyclical model that captures how queer students evaluate environments, calculate risks, and enact strategies to resist marginalization in higher education. *A needs-assessment survey of the high school LGBTQ+ environment by a health science center interprofessional team* (Velasquez et al.) reports on the health and educational needs of LGBTQ+ youth in U.S. high schools and recommends targeted interventions to promote safer and more inclusive learning contexts.

In *Immigration, language education, & trauma: exploring the intersectionality of gay Dominican immigrant experiences*, González employs case study methodology to analyse the compounded trauma faced by gay Dominican men in New York City, illuminating the intersections of race, language, sexuality, and migration. *Unfolding the layers of LGBTQ+ identity, resilience, and multicultural perspectives in Vietnam* (Lam-Nguyen) offers a reflexive narrative that traces the challenges of growing up queer in Vietnam, focusing on bullying, cultural transition, and the importance of family and intercultural solidarity.

Dressed like boys, hair trimmed, a nalla kutti otherwise": construction of queer suicide in Indian online news media (Jetubhai) critiques the sensationalist and stigmatizing representation of queer suicide in Indian journalism, calling for curricular reforms in media training. *Beyond the Iron Throne: exploring the representation of homosexuality in the series Game of Thrones* (Louis and Chithra) demonstrates the ambivalent portrayal of queer characters in a globally influential media franchise, demonstrating how representation oscillates between complexity and sensationalization. Finally, *Iconoclasm of normative structures: exploring queer ageing in "Kaathal: The core" by Jeo Baby* (Shree and Chithra) uses cinematic analysis to foreground queer aging and non-traditional kinship, presenting alternative imaginaries of belonging beyond heteronormative family structures.

Final reflections

Researching sensitive topics is undeniably risky. As the sections of this editorial demonstrate, queer trauma is irrefutably complex and has required much thought, articulation, and revision in the production of this edited Research Topic. As a collective, we have advocated for Queer Trauma to be understood beyond the binaries of victimhood and discrimination. We recognize that researching and writing about queer lives means that often researchers, including those who have contributed to this edition, are laying themselves bare by declaring their own positionalities (Sikes, 2006). We believe that the risks are worth taking for the advancement of inclusion and social justice, and we are therefore grateful to all contributors.

Author contributions

MV: Writing – original draft. JGl: Writing – review & editing. LW: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. JGo: Writing – original draft.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Life experiences leading to the choice of surgery—A qualitative study exploring reasons behind the choice of undergoing gender affirmative surgery

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Objective: Gender dysphoria is frequently accompanied by physical dissatisfaction and body image issues. The primary objective of this study is to explore subjective experiences and perceptions among those who has undergone gender reassignment surgery, as well as their retrospective path to that decision.

Method: Sixteen qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 9 participants. The participants were accepted for gender affirming surgery and interviewed before and after surgery.

Results: Cultural norms, and values in relation to time and context were highlighted as significant in reference to the opportunity one had to display a gender identity that corresponded to prevailing expectations. Participants gradually began to recognize their differences and divergence from others in social interactions and experiencing "wrong" bodily changes during puberty created even greater discrepancy. Several impression control measures, such as avoiding certain situations and using concealing techniques, were employed to prevent what was described as both felt and enacted stigma. The significance of having genital organs that accurately reflect one's gender identity was emphasized to prevent emotional distress and dysphoria caused by this discrepancy.

Conclusion: Socio-cultural expectations, combined with enacted stigma, seem to cause, or re-enforce self-stigma as people internalize these attitudes and suffer from physical and mental consequences as a result. Thus, societal, and cultural trends seem to have a strong influence and feed the idea of being born in the wrong body. However, even though several participants underwent socially inspired alterations, they all experienced dysphoria in the extent that they continued to see reassignment surgery as a solution.

KEYWORDS

gender dysphoria, gender identity, gender affirmative care, gender affirmative surgery, transgender

Background

Transgender is an overarching term for individuals who identify with a gender that are inconsistent or not culturally associated with their assigned sex (van de Grift et al., 2016). The complex phenomenon of gender dysphoria (GD) is described in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) classification of diseases, the diagnoses are gender dysphoria (GD) or gender incongruence (World Health Organization, 2019). GD is a condition in which a person is distressed due to a mismatch between their assigned and experienced gender. The origin of such mismatch is debated and can be interpreted, partly or fully, as a product of normative cisgender expectations (Williams, 2014). Dysphoria and gender incongruence are symptoms that can develop in infancy, adolescence, or in adulthood, and are conditions in which a person's gender identity and gender at birth are at odds. Gender dysphoric patients are often characterized by the pursuit of gender affirmative treatment, which include feminization and masculinization of the body through hormone therapy and surgery (Nieder et al., 2011; Gulbrandsen, 2019).

According to the criterion, Z76.80, feelings of hatred and inadequacy for one's own physical sex are commonly associated with a strong wish to live and be accepted as belonging to the other sex. Thus, these emotions frequently result in the desire for surgery or hormonal treatment to as nearly as possible alter the physique to match the chosen gender. In Norway, where the current study is conducted, these bodily experiences or emotions must have lasted at least 2 years and not be an indication of any other mental disorder such as schizophrenia, or genetic or chromosomal abnormalities (Gulbrandsen, 2019).

Empirical background

In the 1990s, transgender theory and research began to emerge in the United States. The first definitive expression of the field is said to be Stones and Stryker (Stryker and Whittle, 2013), who gathered fifty influential texts with new introductions by the editors that, taken together, documented the evolution of transgender studies in the English-speaking world. Several scientific fields have contributed to the complex and interdisciplinary topic of transgender research. Research on hormonal and surgical treatment has been conducted both nationally and internationally (Tønseth et al., 2010; Bouman and Arcelus, 2017), and transgender research has increased in recent years (Galambos, 2004; Eliason et al., 2010; Kreukles et al., 2010; Fausto-Sterling, 2012). The quality of the studies varies due to a variety of factors, including the difficulty in locating a representative population and the scarcity of randomized controlled studies (Heylens et al., 2014). Most of the available research has focused on transgender health and quality of life (Dhejne et al., 2011), health service interaction, and surgical intervention outcomes (Tønseth et al., 2010).

When this study was initiated in 2019, there were few studies on the subjective experiences of transgender persons. Sociologists Hines (2007) and Ekins and King (2002), gender researcher Stryker and Whittle (2013), as well as sexologists Bouman and Arcelus (2017), are acknowledged as key contributors in international studies and literature. Van der Ros (2013), a gender researcher, has contributed to raising awareness about the challenges faced by transgender people, including subjective aspects. They all stress the complexities of gender in a way that makes it understandable to everyone, not just academics and health-care specialists. Benestad, a sexologist and physician, as well as Almås, a psychologist and sexologist, have contributed to the understanding of the transgender phenomena in Norway (Benestad, 2010; Almås and Benestad, 2017; Benestad et al., 2017). They emphasize the importance of understanding gender variance, and that shame is a function of how gender and transgender identities are formed, recognized, accepted, and validated in different socio-cultural contexts.

The meaning and relevance of shame among transgender people are discussed in Giordano's (2018) literature study of gender, culture, and shame from the 1900s to 2017. The findings demonstrated that the therapeutic influence of shame cannot be overestimated, given the substantial risks associated with it, and the paper shed light on the link between shame and self-destruction. The author claims that shame is significant since it exists outside of the intellect, and Giordano also contends that shame has a social basis, and that shame is a function of how gender and transgender identities are formed, acknowledged, or rather vexed in certain social-cultural settings (Giordano, 2018).

There are some new studies concentrating on transgender people's subjective experiences of living as their assigned gender before treatment and surgery. Jessen et al. (2021) investigated the subjective experiences of GD among help-seeking transgender people assigned female at birth. They found that a variety of physical signs in the body throughout the day triggered GD, as well as emotional recollections of being different. Social interaction proved to be crucial since it affected how one's subjective experiences of GD changed based on the situation and how others responded to them. The participants told how the process of "coming out" was a transformative experience that changed how the participants understood themselves and previous experiences. However, everyday life required careful negotiation to feel "whole," and these efforts came at a price, as some participants tended to dislike their body even more and developed new forms of GD as a consequence of committing to the male identity. Based on the results, the authors suggest a more conceptually nuanced model of GD, where bodily sensations and emotional memories from the past are sources that elicited GD.

Elian Jentoft's master thesis (2019) investigated the experiences of young individuals with gender incongruence and their families in Norway. The findings show that the study participants experienced puberty as a "crisis" which made them feel that they needed immediate preventative interventions. Further, the thesis showed how these pubertal experiences informed conceptualizations of gender affirming care (GAC) as a "lifesaving" treatment. Another Norwegian study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of transgender women in terms of identity and self-understanding (Moen and Aune, 2018). The self-understanding of the participants found different expressions, depending on personality and life experiences, and whether one had "come out of the closet." The participants who had chosen to openly express their perceived identity seemed to feel more secure than those who had not. However, the feeling of belonging and recognition was highly influential and some preferred to live as males out of consideration for those in their surroundings. The study conclude that gender identity may primarily be a cognitive and emotional condition and not necessarily a feeling of being born or confined into to

'the wrong body'. Another qualitative master thesis form Norway (Lerfaldet, 2019) also emphasizes the significance of the social environment regarding the participants prospects of living as their perceived gender. The study found that both intimate relationships, relationships within one's social circle, and the relationship between the participant and the existing norms of the society all can contribute positively and negatively to one's self-esteem and the perceived possibility to live and express themselves as they want.

Two further Norwegian studies explored the relationship between transgender people's sexuality and their bodies. Bolsø (2019) explored the tension between the physical body and the visualization of the body in transgender persons seeking medical correction of the body. The results indicated an underlying drive to remove bodily parts due to the strong symbolism of the present genitals, representing sources of mental unrest and disturbance. Another finding was that persons who identify as transgender experienced hormone-stimulated ambivalence, as the sudden and severe alterations in body image brought on by hormonal therapy, caused new and acute conditions both in relation to symbolic decoding and the actual use of the genitals during sexual activity. The authors argue that there is not principal difference between transgender people and others when it comes to possible- and potentially changing tensions between the ideas about own body and the actual body.

Although transgender people's understanding of themselves and their identity has been described in literature and empirical studies their subjective reasons to undergo medical and surgically treatment, particularly genital surgery, has received little attention in research (Moen and Aune, 2018).

Aim

This study is part of a larger research project aiming to learn more about GD and factors leading to medical and surgical intervention. Thus, we aimed to explore the variety of subjective experiences and interrelated reasons why transgender people undergo bodily modifications. A greater comprehension of subjective experiences of persons with GD may enable us to better comprehend and treat the individual.

Theoretical framework

Parts of the analysis will draw on Goffmann's (1992) interaction and identity-building theory to show how people in society perform or act out their gender roles dependent on their gender identification. Goffmann's (1992) theory is marked by a dramaturgical approach; Goffman being inspired by the theatrical scene in developing the theory. The role theory is concerned with interpersonal interaction, and the first impression is central for how the interaction will take place as all participants will form expectations and execute performances related to the roles they will be expected to play. Goffmann (1992) also discusses how an individual may position herself/himself toward the other participants because of his/her active engagement in the interaction, and therefore take on a role that will influence how the others connect to him or her. Goffmann (1992) distinguishes between "back-stage" and "front-stage" in this interaction. One part is performed out "frontstage," whereas backstage is where the "real" role development takes place, and where the individual plans how he or she will appear in the role. While Goffmann (1992) claims that individuals play roles for a variety of reasons, he also contends that certain people will seek out positions that guarantee their acceptability and acknowledgment by others to avoid both felt and enacted stigma.

Methods

In this part of the study, we sought to explore the subjective experiences of transgender people who are undergoing bodily modifications and the study was guided by the following research question: *Which life experiences, impressions, and ideas influenced individuals' decisions to get gender-confirming surgery?*

Study design

Narrative in-depth interviews were regarded as the best method for exploring unique life experiences. The primary objective of this part of the study was to investigate the participants' subjective experiences and ideas and how those lead to treatment seeking. However, as part of the overall study we also sought to explore experiences related to interactions with the clinic before and after the genital surgery; thus, the interviews were done both before and after the surgery. This part of the study will contain results from the pre-surgery interviews, analyzed with a focus on the research question above.

Study setting and participants

The study participants were all diagnosed with Z.76.80, had started hormonal treatment, and were undergoing surgery at Oslo University Hospital (OUS). Since 1979, OUS has had a country function for the treatment of individuals diagnosed with Z.76.80 (F-64.0), gender incongruence (ICD-10), the current indication position for gender-affirming medical and surgical procedures (Gulbrandsen, 2019).

The participants were recruited by an experienced patient coordinator in one of OUS's departments. The participants come from all around Norway, as the current department is the only one that does gender affirming genital surgery. Ten people were recruited to be interviewed before and after the gender affirmative surgery. After the interviews (one pre- and one post-surgical), one person withdrew consent, and two individuals were unable to attend the follow-up interview owing to a continuing pandemic. Thus, the study includes nine in-depth interviews before surgery and seven in-depth interviews after surgery. In this part of the study the 9 in dept-interviews before surgery is the basis for the analysis.

Data production

The interviews took place between August 2018 and December 2020. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author. To facilitate transcription and contextualize the interviews, field notes were kept with each one. All interviews were tape-recorded, and the pre-surgery interviews, took place 2 weeks before the surgery. The interviews lasted between 45 min and 1 h and 15 min and took place in a consultation room at the hospital. Because of the narrative interview structure, the interviews were conducted in an open manner, and all patients received the same three questions from the interview guide; (1) *Can you tell me a little about your background?* (including probes), (2) *Can you tell me a little about what your expectations are?* (in front of surgery), and (3) *Can you tell me about the process leading to the decision to undergo genital surgery?* The follow-up questions were all unique.

Analysis

We used thematic analysis to identify patterns within the material and followed the guidelines for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Conceptual maps and colors were used to visualize associations between different categories that emerged from the material, and the notes taken during the interviews represented additional analytical sources. All transcriptions were manually coded within a coding frame based on Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed these steps: (1) reading all the material to get an overall impression; (2) identifying units of meaning that represent the individual experience and coding for these; (3) condensing and summarizing the content of each of the coded groups; and (4) integrating the insights from the condensed meaning units into generalized descriptions that reflected apparently significant factors. The analysis was summarized and accounted for in an analysis document that were discussed and negotiated with the co-author.

Ethics

A formal request for participation was sent out in advance, and all participants signed a consent form. The individuals are described using fictional names to ensure de-identification and confidentiality. Norwegian center for research data (NSD) approved the current study. The project was evaluated by the regional committee for medical and health research ethics (REK), which gave its prior approval (2019/731 B).

Results

Deviating from established norms and values

Cultural norms, and values in relation to both time and context were highlighted as significant in reference to the opportunity one had in relation to expressing a gender identity that corresponded to expectations. Values and norms that, for example, applied when the participants were young could be very different from those that pertained when they became adults. Ella, 23 years old, describes this discrepancy:

> The year I was born, you could practically say that girls should have skirts and boys should have jeans, and girls should have long hair and boys should have short hair. [...] The joke my dad always made; it was such a joke that you make to the boys all the time. 'Go and cut your hair and get a job.' It was something I heard when I was younger, and it was something that could make me sad.

Appearance, clothing style and hairstyle are for many described as something they were classified by as children and adolescents. Aleksander 21 years talked about how he tried to meet the expectations of gratefulness and joy when receiving his (female) national costume as a confirmation gift:

> I got a "bunad" (national costume) from my grandmother as a confirmation gift, and it was great ... But, to see that expensive garment, tremendously expensive garment [...] ... and I was just looking forward to taking it off, and after I have not really put on the bunad once. So, you kind of lie a bit just to meet the requirements of those around you.

Cross-cultural differences in gender expressions and behavioral expectations were also addressed as a complicating factor. Ingrid, 36, born in Asia, experienced that due to the context she was raised in, it was even more difficult to deviate from what was expected, and her parents were openly criticized: "*My parents' friends said they had to teach me, they said to my parents that they must teach me to be a boy, such a real boy again. I could not be in the middle....*"

Being different and her parents' inability to manage it also led to violent incidents, committed by both family and friends: "*When I was in my home country, I was also beaten and harassed. Not just me, but also my family.*"

Regardless of context and in a variety of ways, all participants shared narratives that described experiences of feeling different in a way that had social ramifications. Maria, a 21-year-old, explains how feeling self-conscious, but also anxious about her identity made her isolated:

> There were a lot of people (parents) who thought I was going to make their children abnormal and make their children no longer children because I was so incredibly grown up, and I had worries and thoughts that no one else had. And then in the end other children were told to stay away from me.

Several participants told how they were aware of their parents' or others' annoyance or expressions of judgment about what they were doing or how they seemed. Many stated that they wanted to live up to the demands around them but that they often failed to do so. Not feeling accepted or included often led to feelings of shame, both of themselves and on behalf of the family. This resulted not only in potential isolation, but different types of "punishments." The experience of being punished combined with a lack of insight into why they evoked such strong feelings in others, was painful and difficult for many. Ella, 23 years old, describes this:

> I played with dolls from when I was very young, and when mum and dad got annoyed with me, or put cars or action figures or Lego in front of me, I started to cry. So, this was a long time before I really started to express myself verbally, so I have felt this since I was very young. But I did not know what it was at that time, right, I did not know what transsexualism is, it is not something you know, you just feel that something is wrong.

The desire to do what is "normal" and "right" combined with a strong belief in what is common and what is unusual, is described by many. Talking about being encouraged or told to play with toys that are defined as "the right" for the opposite sex made the participants confused, and at times even angry. It seemed incomprehensible and unfair to be "punished" for doing something they thought was fun.

Many reflected on the coping strategies they had used to handle bullying and disruptive behavior. Some talked about how they had eaten their lunch in the lavatory, cried in the school restroom, and tried to stay alone but were nonetheless bothered by disrespectful words and behaviors. They describe how they have let bad words hail, pretended not to be hurt, and according to Alexander, 21 years; in the aftermath "*cried more than the amount of fluid in the body indicates is possible.*" Most of the participants underlined that they had never felt "accepted," and some described previous thoughts about themselves using adjectives like "dirty" and "contagious."

The experience of being different and lonely

Most individuals desire a sense of community, fellowship, and belonging to the herd, yet many labeled this as "unthinkable" and "utopian." Not being invited to birthdays, not being invited home after school, and not having someone to accompany them, to and from school, affected many. Physical alterations when puberty gradually started and developed formed even greater discrepancy in many. Memories where they compared their bodies to other people's bodies induced feelings of frustration and again shame. Negative emotions and intensified feelings of alienation were outlined. Difficulties participating in the gym, swimming and other physical activities made the exclusion even greater and many of the participants describe how the sensation of loneliness grew. The physical changes associated with puberty are described by Ella, 23 years old, who at that time was going through a boy's puberty:

> *When I started to become a teenager, or when I started to get a little older, I was around 8–9 years old, and then came those gym classes. Then I remember that the girls started getting such small hormonal breasts then, such small pellets. And the girls compared breast size. 'Oh, look at me, I have bigger than you,' and then finally I started to stand with my arms a little like crossing over my chest and thought: 'Where are mine? Why do I not have boobs'*

The fear of physical attributes exposing that they were biologically born the opposite sex, posed a great threat to many and gave rise to a lot of stress in childhood and adolescence. The participants talked about social restrictions they imposed on themselves, such as isolating themselves rather than being with others, and many did not talk to anyone about the feelings that prevailed inside. Kim, 39 years old, talks about the desire to fit in and having a close friend:

> I noticed that it was a bit painful in a way not to have ... Just like someone like that, a friend or something like that. Because I did not fit in, so even though they wanted to play with me, it was just like something in me made me not want to, I was not quite like them.

All the participants tell in their own way about how they felt alone in a world where their body did not develop on the outside as they felt on the inside; and how this reinforced the negative spiral related to the feeling of alienation.

The fear that someone would see the genitals in which did not correspond to the identity; thus "revealing" that they are not who they claim to be, were described as overriding and repeated by most participants several times in the interviews. Ingrid, 36 years old, describes this fear in an illustrative way:

> I remember very well that there were a lot of such grotesque stories and things that were taken up during parent meetings and stuff, where it was boys and girls in the class who had joined each other in the bathroom and started studying each other, because they have to find out what is the difference between girls and boys, and then I started thinking: What if someone comes and asks me? If they can look at me? And then these thoughts and questions were there about ... This couldn't be right, this does not feel like it's mine, that I should not have it (male genitals). And that was when I somehow first started to feel the feeling of being unhappy as a genetically born male, boy.

Practical challenges such as mandatory activities of changing clothes also created difficult situations and emotions for many in childhood and adolescence. Agnethe, 25 years old, describes how the discomfort exposing her body and genitals meant that she often avoided changing clothes:

> Eh. I have a very bad gym grade, so I, because my time in high school was horrible when it came to the gym, eh wardrobe, wardrobe change and such, was some of the worst that existed. So, I simply refused to change gym clothes from time to time in which pulled down my grade a lot so I think I have grade 2 or 3 (one being the lowest) in gymnastics so I think I should just take up the gym again.

Preventing or physically avoiding situations that potentially could expose genitals and reveal a conflicted identity was described as a repetitive pattern that frequently required a management strategy. Loneliness and negative emotions and thoughts are recurring topics in the participants' stories. Three of the participants described the importance of having fantasy friends. However, they expressed that they felt embarrassed and ashamed when their parents' overheard conversations with their fantasy friends and asked whom they were talking to. Gina, 24 years old, tells how she at one point thought that she might be "crazy":

> And then I started to get very, very lonely, and got a very bad thought inside my head that I think about to this day, and it was that I started to think I was crazy. Because I had fantasy friends, because I was a very lonely child.

The fact that the friends only represented a fantasy and not physical friends made many feel that something was wrong with them. This was related to the fact that they did not experience that there were others who had friends who theoretically did not exist. At the same time, these friends were very much alive; they could see them clearly and they represented sources to limit the feeling of loneliness.

Strategies to protect own identity

The participants' stories about how they expressed themselves in childhood are considered a significant finding. The participants emphasize that in encounters with others, they started to recognize that they were different and divergent from others. Such experiences sheds light on the driving force and motivation behind the person who chooses to take the long journey toward surgically changing their genitals. Several of the participants talked about concealment stories they created in which reflected the time and the world they lived in to become a part of the norm. Similarly, several told how they in their childhood developed strategies for acquiring "girl toys" or "boy toys" and playing with them in secret. Gina, 24 years old, is one of those who describes this:

> I had a small wooden box that was out in our doll's house, and I took that wooden box down to the pier where there was a boat, and then I hid that wooden box, under the pier. Had my Barbie dolls hidden there. Every single day in the summer I ran down there, and played for maybe half an hour, 20 minutes, then I had to get back up so that my mother and father were not worried, and then go down again for half an hour, 20 minutes, and play.

Gina told that she made the decision to keep her sentiments and toy preferences a secret out of feelings of embarrassment about not meeting what she believed to be her parents' expectations. Such stories are illustrative of all the participants in the study, and many tell how important it was that others were not to see through what they were really thinking and who they really were. Maria, 21 years old, tells how she deliberately isolated herself both to avoid being exposed to other people's thoughts about her, and to avoid revealing her difficult thoughts about herself:

> I go into myself and isolate myself and, and avoid things when I have felt that ... When I have felt anxiety in relation to what people think about me, and what I have between my legs and things like that…

Isolation to avoid "revealing oneself" or "exposing oneself" to the reactions of others was repeatedly described as a type of coping strategy. Another type of strategy was to ensure careful planning of activities that could potentially reveal the side of the identity that were to be kept hidden. Ella, 23 years old, talks about careful planning to ensure that she could play the way she wanted without anyone discovering it:

> And then when I was 10–11–12 I had savings, so I took a backpack with me, and inside it I had a hoodie. Then I cycled down to the toy store, bought myself the Disney Barbie dolls, asked if I could borrow the toilet at the toy store, changed my hoodie and cycled home. Because I was so afraid that someone would have seen me there, both friends, family, if there was someone who could tell on me, that I had been to the toy store…

The constant effort of finding ways to make sure that their gender identity was not made visible to the outside world, thus living it out in secret, was one of the most common patterns among the participants. Most of the participants use the classification boys' toys, girls' toys, and the same gender division about clothes. They explicate the discrepancy between what they themselves want and what expectations everyone around them has. The discrepancy seems to be related to the sociocultural norms that govern the surrounding society and how parents' and others' mind-sets influence participants' ideas of what clothes to wear, or should wear, and what is the right way to move and behave when you have either female or male genitals.

To constantly feel that you do not master or want what the environment requires encourages negative emotions that are repeated and reinforced. Negative and conflicting feelings are also linked to the experience that you are constantly lying to others; thus, you present yourself as a different person than you really are. Different coping strategies to hide physical changes associated with puberty are outlined among most of the participants. Some of the measures were simple, such as wearing larger clothes to hide breasts, while other measures caused physical discomfort in the long run, such as choosing to walk with a crooked back even though the musculoskeletal system was affected. Aleksander, 21 years old, talks about such a strategy:

> I got my period quite late. And so ... I generally feel that I developed quite late. But when that development first began, I was like this … uff… I did not like it. And when I started getting breasts, I sank down quite a bit, because I did not want it to appear that I had breasts, so I started walking very crooked, and with very baggy clothes.

Keeping alleged gender identity vs. biological gender secret was particularly important for the participants in puberty and adolescence. Three of the participants stated that they did not talk to anyone about how they felt. Agnethe, 25 years old, explains why it was important not to convey her thoughts to anyone, but also that she lacked words to describe what she felt:

> I did not tell anyone about it then because it was a bit controversial at the time and honestly, I had no words for what I was feeling so I just lived with it. It is very difficult to describe it to someone who has not felt it in a way. It is like such a feeling of error that only got drastically worse and worse throughout puberty.

Several participants expressed that being all alone with such feelings, triggered the need to stay away from other people, not go out, live their lives via the internet and plan all activities to the smallest detail. Many of the participants also told that they had developed mental health problems over time, and received various types of diagnoses, such as anxiety and depression. Constant inner turmoil in relation to who you are, want to be, and the possibility of making radical changes to get better (hormones and/or surgery) seemed to make the participants find it difficult to sort emotions and think clearly.

Gender identity and the significance of the genitalia

The significance of having a genital organ that reflects experienced gender identity are emphasized during many interviews. Physical and mental discomfort as well as physical pain from having a genital organ which according to the participant should not be there is another aspect. Ingrid, 36 years old, talks about her relationship to her genitals: *"I'm not myself if I still have it down there, right. That penis. [...] Yes, so I must do what's right for me [. . .]. It is to get it done, to get rid of what should not really be there. . . ."*

Challenging and strong feelings related to the genitals represented for many a major motivation to eventually choose to implement radical changes such as hormone therapy and surgery. The perception of not being complete; that there is something that is "not supposed to be there" or something that is "missing" is described by all the participants. The desire to change this, and unpleasant feelings and inner stress associated with the possibility of such a change, are illustrated in the participants stories. Kim, 39 years old, describes how he thinks being "whole" must be related to having a genital organ that corresponds to a perceived gender identity:

> Well, I feel like any man in the street. Just that I'm missing one thing, for me, what I'm missing is the last bit. I just want to feel a completely different feeling... I want to go to the toilet (standing) in the woods when I'm out jogging. It's just knowing that, okay, I have something there (a penis) . . .

Many describe how the discrepancy between their genitals and the one they identify as is perceived as a paramount and exhausting emotion. Some of the participants had told some friends about their biological sex and the process they were going through, while others had only told it to one or two confidants, for example a friend or parent. Thus, even when becoming an adult there were many difficult situations where the discrepancy between the genitals and the identity being played out, risked being revealed. In situations such as being in the woods, at festivals, in public toilets, it becomes visible how urination is performed, and participants told how they continually prepare and take precautions to ensure that no one can see their genitalia or how they stand or sit.

Participants typically used unfavorable words to describe the external genitalia. Many talked of having a type of pre-puberty curiosity about whether they would have a penis, tits, or vagina. When puberty hit and the opposite of what they expected presented itself, it was a kind of anxiety and a feeling of inaccuracy with discomfort that dominated the descriptions. Elliot, 46 years old, describes this feeling of discomfort: "*Disgust. It was like that, ehh . . . I did not relate to them (breasts). So, it was just something that hung there, that in a way should not be there.*"

Distaste for what "hung" there or "stood out" is representative of the descriptions of external gender characteristics that did not match. Aids such as tight vests were used to hide the breast for others but mostly for themselves, so they did not trigger bad vibes, in which was somewhat partly successful. Several said that such aids were painful and tight and that taking them on and off triggered the feeling of discomfort. Elliot, goes on to describe this:

> You kind of don't get rid of that little indication of breasts. So, I remember when I had my breasts removed, so ... It was almost like that 'now it can stop here' (the changes) [. . .]. Because it was so liberating.

Agnethe, 25 years old, describes the same feeling of discomfort associated with the genitalia:

> The fact that it is there (the penis), seemingly can feel that it is there all the time, it is, it is a bad feeling. Not as bad now as it was before. Now, I can't get a boner (erection) and such things because the hormones reduce it drastically unless you want it yourself. I like. . ., I have not used it. I use it minimally. Preferably avoid touching it and doing such things.

As described by Agnethe, the feeling of discomfort causes many of the participants to experience cleansing, urination, and sexual stimulation as forms of touch that they may have great difficulty performing or experiencing. Similarly, challenging feelings were portrayed in situations where the genitals were to be exposed or touched by others, as in gynecological examinations: Elliot, 46 years old, describes such a situation: "*It was my second gynecological examination throughout my 35 years, at that time. Ehh, maybe I was 39 years. Yes ... And, it was also like, like just, it was absolutely awful.*"

Lying in a gynecological chair or pulling down your pants while others examine the genitals is by several of the participants described as a demanding feeling that evokes responses described as "nausea," "disgust," and "fear." According to the descriptions depicted by several participants, there are periods when they forget that the outer genitalia do not correspond to their identity and suddenly it is a mirror, a look, a feeling that throws them back into the emotion of discomfort and nausea. Rejecting a body part by not looking at it, not touching it or relating to it in any way, gives participants time and space to forget the feeling of "being wrong." But as soon as they are reminded of the body part either by themselves, by an emotion, or by a visual reminder, they express the return of hurtful and difficult feelings. Such reminders were often linked to urination and the use of public toilets, but not at least to the inevitable daily exposures and touches. Agnethe, 25 years old, describes the feeling of washing her penis: "*I have to wash my penis because it is hygienic, but it's not exactly something I like to do. I breathe heavily and make grimaces with my face. . . .*"

Having sexual intercourse with others represented a situation in which ambivalent and challenging feelings were activated. Maria, 21 years old, talks about situations where such feelings are evoked:

> I look at myself in the mirror, and I shower, and … during sex too, so it can be, that I sometimes feel the sensation ... (bad bodily sensation). Then I interrupt because I suddenly do not feel for it anymore, and it is like ... (pause). When I did not have a regular sex partner, I was more like that, I did not expect them to touch me or things like that. Like not acknowledging it (the penis).

Several of the participants discuss how their age, security, and apparently reliable partners allow them to forget about their discomfort until instances like the ones described above remind them of it. The perception that something is wrong and uncomfortable therefore endures. Several of the participants reported physical and mental changes after commencing hormone therapy. They explain that it causes less discomfort in "being oneself," but that when difficult and painful emotions arise, it is perceived as very challenging since they have had a break from such experiences.

Discussion

This study explores patients' thoughts, feelings, and experiences, during childhood and adolescence, as they gradually prepare for genital surgery. Despite individual differences, there are some major themes that should be discussed to better understand why people want to undergo hormone therapy and genital surgery. One of the themes relates to experiences and various cultural conventions of gender expression, which is strongly connected to the meaning of genitalia and gender identity. Another theme relates to the felt need of concealing one's gender identity and body as a form of self-defense, and thus crucial to resolve. This feeling is connected to the experience of being different and not knowing why, and the associated experience of being stigmatized and punished for this difference. Another significant issue concerns the importance of having a genital organ that expresses one's actual gender identity as well as the psychological and physical distress associated with a genital organ that, according to the participant, should not exist or is absent.

According to Norwegian historian and gender researcher Sandal (2017), there has been a considerable change in our understanding of gender and gender identity since the 1950s (2017). Depending on the age of participants, they describe contemporary thoughts about what constitutes a man and a woman in terms of appropriate clothes, mannerisms, and mindset. Thus, it is relevant to contextualize the findings by looking at how the understanding of gender and gender identity is continuously changing, as it has always done historically. Butler (1990) and Foucault (2006) shed light on how the understanding of gender and sexuality, violations of gender norms, and what is considered normal variation or pathology, have changed throughout history—depending on which views dominate. Butler (1990) claimed that although there are physical differences between men and women, you are not born a "woman"; rather, you become one by your actions or performances, actions and performances that are influenced by religion and myths. Further, the role of patriarchy has been strengthened by political structures like inheritance and marriage, and social expectations on how woman are to behave and "perform." This includes how women are to dress in different phases of life and serves as a form of subjugation that continues into old age. Butler (1990) used Beauvoir's ideas from the book Beauvoir (2015) to support her performativity theories, and according to Beauvoir, becoming a woman is a process that starts in childhood, and as girls enter adolescence, they become more "woman" transforming further into the "other sex." Sexuality and sexual initiation represent the final stages of entering the role of the woman, while motherhood completes the girls transition to "woman." Even though the concept of gender and gender identity has altered dramatically, one might discuss to what extent socio-cultural expectations and imaginations still shape the perceptions of what constitutes a man and a woman—and how those expectations affect the individuals' perception of themselves. A systematic review of studies carried out globally reveals that gender variant people face greater rates of violence and discrimination in job, healthcare, and housing across cultures as a population traditionally punished for violating gender norms (Reisner et al., 2016). According to Goffman (1990), the basis of stigmatization processes consists of comparable mechanisms of assessments based on normative expectations of how a person should behave in society. If it is concluded that a person expresses or performs in deviant ways (such as a girl wearing masculine clothes) or has "attributes" that are inconsistent with the characteristics of the category of people to which they belong (such as a boy with breasts), these inconsistencies devalue them as undesirable and flawed, potentially designating them as members of a stigmatized group (Goffman, 1990, p. 12). Those that are stigmatized normally come from the same cultural background as their appraisers. As a result, the individual will be conscious of the fact that they fall short of the social norm of the group to which they strive. This self-stigma may have negative effects on the person's conception of themselves and cause shame (Goffman, 1990, p. 18). In other words, stigma and shame may be elements that foster the emergence of psychological suffering. To put this concern in context, we must recognize that gender is both a biological feature and a socially and culturally controlled term (Bussey and Bandura, 1999). Boys and girls recognize their differences early on, since adults treat them differently regardless of situation, and youngsters respond appropriately. Depending on which society life is played out in, and to a greater or lesser extent depending on that society, there are different written and unwritten rules for how girls and boys, women and men, should behave. They are expected to perform different roles and duties, and they face different expectations in terms of characteristics and capabilities (von Tetzchner, 2018). Children's gender awareness involves both real conditions, such as the fact that boys grow up to be men and girls grow up to be women, and society's expectations of how boys and girls behave in various situations (Von Tetzchner, 2001). Several interviewees stated that they had known from childhood that what they were doing or how they were "performing" (Goffman, 1956) did not conform to established, culturally specific norms. Thus,

expressing oneself in contradiction to such norms caused a self-inflicted shame.

Our study shows that to prevent being identified as their opposite ascribed gender, many act and "perform" in line with what is (assumingly) expected. Goffman's (1956) "dramaturgical model of social interaction" illustrates how a person continually negotiates their image and appearance in interactions with other people to fit into a norm. By moving between backstage and frontstage, playing out various roles, such as "forbidden" gender-related activities backstage, the participants managed to entertain their perceived gender and at the same time (to a certain extent) avoid stigmatization when being exposed to the public eye.

Trying to avoid being exposed, colored the childhood and adolescents among the participants. This specific behavioral pattern of playing out different parts of the identity in different "stages" could be conscious or partly subconscious. Most people acknowledge that those ranked low in the social order, such as stigmatized groups, frequently face daily injustice or "small miseries," illuminated by Bourdieu's (1999, 4) idea of social suffering. Because of how society devalues difference and the stigma attached to it, human difference can be experienced not only as small miseries but also represent a barrier to lifetime functioning (Kittay, 2006). In the study by Jessen et al. (2021) on subjective GD experiences among help-seeking transgender and gender non-confirming youth, participants described emotional recollections of feeling different and left out among peers as a child. Some linked their sentiments to their incongruent gender, while others linked them to a general sense of not belonging and that these emotional experiences still tormented them. That is consistent with the experiences of many of the participants in our study who recalled attempting to conform to culturally accepted behavior in the name of what were seen as "natural," often resulting in inconsistent behavior and humiliating situations.

Goffmann (1992) outlines how we categorize others and how others classify us, as well as how we react to others because of these classifications. It can be interpreted to mean that we can't relate to one another without placing each other in categories. Our study shows that some children as young as 4–5 years old employed covert tactics, deception, and making up stories while interacting with adults. In this way they could perform according to the anticipated roles of their biological gender "frontstage" (Goffmann, 1992), while living out their perceived identity on the covert "backstage." However, living with these inconsistencies, and having to change in between "stages" or categories, was described as influential in the chosen group's decisions regarding initiating hormone therapy, and finally surgery. All the participants, both those who had been accepted by their families and communities, and those who had not, expressed a strong and consistent desire for genital surgery. It is, however, difficult to say, were the feelings of being "wrong" derives from. Traditional gender roles, gender-specific toys, clothes, looks, behavior, and body language have all been highlighted by multiple participants as major factors in feeling "wrong." Thus, societal and cultural trends seem to have a strong influence and feed the idea of being born in the wrong body. Furthermore, social medias allow people to interact with like-minded people in support groups, enhancing acceptance of who they are.

In the study by Jessen et al. (2021), most of the participants stated that their subjective experiences with gender dysphoria were impacted by their interactions with others. They had also experienced that forming bonds and relationships with people could help relate to their bodies in new ways, decreasing their subjective symptoms of gender dysphoria. In our study, we found that such bonds seemed to increase the individual's self-esteem, and thus the stages might "flip." In other words, some participants started to live out their self-identified gender frontstage, even before initiating hormonal treatment or surgical operations. Some experienced that they no longer felt the need to conceal or act, and with the right support and acceptance from others, the symptoms of gender dysphoria could modify, but also sometimes persist. One of the findings of the study by Jessen et al. (2021) was that living as the identified gender had been a transforming experience that had affected how participants saw their history. The participants expressed relief, stating that they now could understand their former sentiments and emotional recollections of being different in a another perspective. This is consistent with many of our participants' accounts, who told that they were able to relax more and weren't always defending who they were after they began to recognize and behave somewhat in accordance with their perceived genders. However, the findings also show that, dependent on the situation, participants were constantly attempting to somehow regulate the impressions (impression management) (Goffman, 1956). The notion that someone would see that their genitalia did not correlate to who they claimed to be in society, was characterized as an immensely scary thought, and can be interpreted as feelings strongly encouraging the need for an exterior alteration such as surgery. In the study by Jessen et al. (2021) some participants told that despite their best efforts; they were still unable to reduce subjective gender dysphoria experiences and thus struggled with shame, guilt, and confusion.

In our study we found that even though several of our participants underwent socially inspired alterations, they all experienced dysphoria in the sense of distaste for their genitals. Further, they all continued to require surgery even if friends, family, and their community accepted their gender identity. The findings describing distaste and the experience of being stigmatized, both felt and enacted, seem to be related (Goffman, 1956). External body parts were frequently described in negative ways by many participants. Many remembered a sense of wonderment about what they believed would happen when they reached puberty. When puberty arrived and the opposite of what they expected occurred, descriptions of discomfort, anxiousness, and a sense of inaccuracy predominated. Some also described how people seemed to be staring at them, and that some acted aggressively toward them. This type of enacted stigma, combined with general socio-cultural expectations, may cause or re-enforce self-stigma as people internalize these public attitudes and suffer numerous negative consequences as a result (Corrigan and Rao, 2012).

All the study participants emphasized the significance of having a genital organ that corresponded to their gender identity. Through their narratives we learned that the physical and mental pain of having a genital organ that did not suit their identity grew, and this sensation served as a constant reminder of not being

complete; that there was something "missing" or something that should not have been there. Rejecting a body part by not looking at it, not touching it or relating to it in any way, was a way of handling feelings of "being wrong." However, as soon as they were reminded of the body part either by themselves, by others, or by an emotion, the difficult feelings returned. In their study, Jessen et al. (2021) mentions a theme called bodily sensations, which refers to numerous types of difficult bodily experiences that occur during the day and defines "embodied pain" as the anguish and dysphoria that persons who go through "wrong" puberty experience. The study by Jentoft (2019) study showed how entering the "wrong puberty" often resulted in impression control measures such as wearing clothing (binders) over newly formed body parts like breasts. This is consistent with our participants' accounts of growing pains, genital discomfort, and continuous reminders during bathroom visits, showering, sexual intimacy or intercourse, and other everyday activities, culminating in several concealment strategies, avoidance of activities, and sometimes development of social anxiety. As emphasized earlier, international studies find that gender variant young persons may be more likely to struggle with depression, suicidal ideology, anxiety, eating disorders, and self-harm compared to cisgender peers (Grossman and D'Augelli, 2007; Grossman et al., 2011; Connolly et al., 2016; Olson et al., 2016).

In a study that examined whether distress and impairment, two essential traits of mental disorders, could be explained by social rejection and violent experiences rather than being characteristics of transgender identity, it was discovered that social rejection and violence were highly predictive of distress and all types of dysfunctions (Robles et al., 2016). LGBTQ groups are often affected by what is termed minority stress, which is caused by sexism toward men and women who express their gender, identify, or sexuality differently from the norm and who are criticized or derided for their appearance or behavior (López-Sáez et al., 2020). According to Winter et al. (2016) health disparities among transgender people, particularly in terms of mental health, are like a slope that leads from stigma to illness. Thus, the stigma transgender people encounter throughout their lives can be a major contributor to the disparities in mental health and wellbeing that persist also after transition and/or care that is gender affirming (Robles et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2016). Up until 2019, the WHO's diagnosis manual classified transgender persons as having mental disorders, which shaped how transgender people received healthcare; likely reinforced stigma; and likely had a significant negative influence on their health and welfare (World Health Organization, 2019). Thus, stigma and social suffering may be factors that create conditions for psychological suffering to emerge (Robles et al., 2016), and should be included as a perspective when discussing and developing health policies for transgender people. As suggested by Winter et al. (2016) governments and other public entities should invest in public education about gender incongruence so that transgender people can experience full social inclusion. Additionally, those who work with transgender persons, such as health care professionals, need to be trained to deliver services that are responsive to the needs and rights of transgender people. Such efforts may not only reduce self-inflicted stigma but also enhance resilience to societal stigma and social suffering among transgender people.

Weaknesses and strength of the study

The study has relatively few informants and including more participants could have added more perspectives. Another weakness could be that the interviewer has worked with the patient group for 10 years, thus more difficult to maintain an open mind during analysis. However, the second author has no experience with the topic, and the analysis and the results are based on discussions and negotiations between the two authors. All the participants had early onset gender incongruence, and all had undergone genital surgery. Thus, the participants had many experiences in common and they had all taken the radical choice of going through surgery. Understanding the background for this choice was the main focus of this part of the study. Another strength was that the participants were interviewed both before and after surgery, and in this way we were able to elaborate several of the topics addressed in the first interview. Another strength is the obvious public interest in this topic and the study mad add new knowledge and understanding that may inspire the already ongoing public debates.

Future research

We suggest that future studies focus on quality of life after genital surgery, and within this focus address topics as sexual function after genital surgery, including potential pains and complications. Further, it would be interesting to explore different dimensions of sexuality, both before and after genital surgery, and also how social function and issues related to mental health may change after surgery.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, with some reservations.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REK), which gave its prior approval (2019/731 B). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

LB and MS were responsible for the conception of the study, development of the study design, and drafting the manuscript. LB conducted the data collection, while both authors participated in the data analysis. All authors have read and approved

the final manuscript and are accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Building a model of navigational strategies for queer undergraduate students in STEM

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Introduction: There is a critical need to foster inclusive educational spaces for Queer identifying students and to resist oppressive structures that seek to marginalize and inflict trauma on students because of their gender or sexual identity.

Methods: Drawing on thematic analysis and Queer theory, we interviewed 11 Queer identifying STEM students to understand the navigational strategies they leveraged within higher education environments related to their Queer identity.

Results: We developed a cyclical model of navigational strategies employed by Queer STEM students that involved evaluating the environments, performing psychological identity calculations, and engaging in behavioral actions. Students evaluated the environment by attending to the diversity of gender representation, presence of other Queer individuals, and contextual factors conveyed based on disciplinary expectations. Students engaged in psychological identity calculations whereby they assessed beliefs about the relevance, importance, and fears related to their Queer identity, with few perceiving any benefits. Behavioral actions resulted in students building a chosen community, disclosing or shelving their queer identity, and advocating for representation.

Discussion: In order to support Queer students to thrive in educational contexts, researchers and practitioners should examine ways to increase representation, use inclusive pedagogical strategies, and understand the relevance of Queerness within disciplinary fields. Questioning the relevance or presence of Queerness in higher education environments only further serves to oppress, inflict trauma, and marginalize Queer students.

KEYWORDS

queer, STEM, LGBTQQIP2SA+, discourses, navigational strategies, trauma, cognitive

1 Introduction

Representation matters! And thus, it is important that we build educational spaces so that individuals feel comfortable "coming out" and do not fear harm or potential trauma from others. Coming out in educational spaces is often impacted by situational variables that relate to the climate and reported comfort levels in disclosing sexual identity. Educational research has suggested that Queer students are more comfortable coming out in classes where they know the other students (Eliason and Turalba, 2019), where they perceive the classroom climate and instructor as more accepting (Lopez and Chims, 1993), and are influenced by the specific disciplinary environment (Bilimoria and Stewart, 2009; Leyva et al., 2016; Yoder and Mattheis,

2016). As such, there is a need to better understand the nuanced factors impacting Queer students' experiences that are situated within disciplinary contexts and instructional environments. This study aims to explore the experiences of Queer students who are majoring in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields and the navigational strategies they employ to be successful within the spaces of higher education. This work is imperative for increasing the participation, success, and retention of Queer students.

There has been a push to broaden the participation of students with marginalized identities in STEM over the past several decades; however, students with a Queer identity are chronically forgotten, understudied, and underrepresented in STEM spaces. As a result, there is limited prior research on Queer students' experiences in undergraduate STEM courses (Cech and Waidzunas, 2011; Cooper and Brownell, 2016; Kersey and Voigt, 2021) and even less on Queer STEM students' experiences in different higher education environments.

Queer students in the arts, humanities, and social sciences often describe a more welcoming and inclusive climate as compared to students in STEM fields. For example, the voices and lives of Queer individuals are often represented in the curriculum for arts and humanities, but in STEM this is often seen as "tangential" to the subject (Hughes, 2018). Based on existing literature, we know Queer students are comparatively more likely to change from a STEM to a non-STEM major than students who do not report having a Queer identity (Hughes, 2018). Additionally, Queer students have described STEM classrooms as "not being a welcoming or accepting space" (Cooper and Brownell, 2016), which is further complicated in classrooms that leverage active learning (group work, class discussions, etc.) which often "increases the relevance of students' Queer identities due to increased interactions" with peers (Cooper and Brownell, 2016). These class structures and interactions are often viewed as unsafe spaces for students with Queer identities. Through social interactions within these climates, Queer identity can be marginalized and oppressed even without students disclosing one's Queer identity. These marginalizing forces can occur through the presence of microaggressions (e.g., derogatory statements, invalidations, insults) that creates barriers for students in coming out (Vaccaro, 2012; Vaccaro and Koob, 2018). For instance, 99% of Queer youth report hearing the derogatory use of phrases such as 'that's so gay' or 'you are so gay' in school (Kibirige and Tryl, 2013). These nondescript microaggressions impress that Queer identities are something to be avoided and concealed, especially in the social and educational context of school environments. The more these comments are tolerated, the more oppressive tension Queer youth feel to hide their identities as they grow older. Therefore, researchers and practitioners must consider how to make learning spaces more inclusive and equitable for Queer students.

The perceived objectivity within STEM creates dissonance among students that their Queer identity is irrelevant and should not impact their experiences. For instance, although Queer students report neutral climates in STEM spaces, this is due in part because they report not having connections with Queer communities and do not believe their Queer identity relates to the discipline (Gunckel, 2009; Fischer 2013; Cech, 2015; Hughes, 2018; Haverkamp et al., 2021). These students often cast STEM as an escape from their Queer identity since "STEM creates objective viewpoints where orientation is not considered…[and] gender and sexuality are not important to the efficiency of work" (Smith, 2014, p. 60). This belief that Queer identity is irrelevant results in Queer students feeling uncomfortable revealing their sexual orientation in STEM spaces, because of their desire to not make others uncomfortable, and since coming out creates a sense of constant vulnerability that means staying closeted is safer and easier in these spaces (Smith, 2014). When you combine students' personal views of coming out with pressure within the field to depoliticize STEM and thus remove any mention of social identities, it results in the erasure and oppression of Queer identities in STEM (Cech, 2015). In order to advance the culture of equity and inclusion for Queer students in STEM, there may be benefits to studying their experiences in non-STEM learning spaces as well.

As such, our goal is to better understand the experiences of Queer STEM students in higher education by investigating the following research question: *What are the navigational strategies that Queer STEM students leverage to support their sense of safety, belonging, and ability to thrive in higher education?*

2 Literature review

2.1 Previous related research queer in STEM

Despite efforts to increase representation of racial, ethnic, and sexual minority groups in STEM, a recent national longitudinal survey confirms that Queer students are 7% less likely to be retained in STEM fields than their heterosexual peers in postsecondary education (Hughes, 2018). This study also found that both gender and sexual minority status were negative predictors of STEM retention in their multilevel regression model. Hughes (2018) noted that faculty and administrators may attribute the differences in retention to academic preparation and participation in experiences known to support success in STEM (such as undergraduate research), but the difference in retention was still observed when controlling for these factors. In other words, Queer students "who are as academically prepared, or even more prepared than, their peers leave STEM at higher rates" (Hughes, 2018, pg. 3).

One exploratory study by Cooper and Brownell (2016), specifically considered the experiences of Queer students in an undergraduate biology lecture course that incorporated collaborative learning groups and other active-learning strategies. They found that Queer biology students do not perceive biology classrooms to be welcoming to their social identities, but engagement in active-learning increased the relevance of their social identities due to more opportunities for interaction with peers (Cooper and Brownell, 2016). Cooper and Brownell (2016) also determined that collaborative group work may increase the comfort level of Queer students who may get to collaborate with students who share their identity or are accepting of it, but may also lead to discomfort when grouped with students who are not perceived as accepting of their social identity. They reported that navigating these group dynamics may lead to an increased cognitive load for Queer students who are working through academic content while also grappling with fears of being stigmatized, misgendered, or unaccepted by their peers (Cooper and Brownell, 2016). Queer students are very mindful of who they are working with and desire the autonomy to choose who they work with to ensure their safety and sense of belonging (Cooper and Brownell, 2016). Similar to

Hughes, this study is a call to action for faculty and researchers to better understand and improve the climate of STEM learning spaces for Queer students to ultimately increase their retention in the field.

There is an increase in literature surrounding Queer postsecondary STEM students and how they perceive STEM fields in conjunction with their Queer identities. In two recent studies, participants described STEM fields as devoid of identity and objective; yet, additionally cited that their Queer identities felt excluded within STEM fields (Kersey and Voigt, 2021). More intricately, the studies found that postsecondary trans women in STEM described gender-based biases within their STEM courses referencing the overt oppression participants would face when presenting as female versus when presenting as male which not only confirms the presence of gender-based bias but transfers to participants feeling as though their Queer identities are unwelcome within STEM spaces (Kersey and Voigt, 2021). The majority of participants continued to allude to STEM spaces feeling exclusionary to their Queer identities even when viewing their own Queer identities as strengths (Kersey and Voigt, 2021).

In order to increase participation of women and Queer individuals within STEM fields, it is necessary to question the gendered nature of STEM fields through the lens of Faulkner's technical/social dualism (Leyva et al., 2016). Leyva and colleagues found that it is impossible to capture the unique experiences women and Queer individuals have within engineering spaces as a collective whole; instead, there should be an emphasis on capturing individual experiences within engineering to develop a more nuanced understanding of how marginalized student groups negotiate their identities within these masculinized spaces (Leyva et al., 2016). Utilizing methodologies that focus on capturing all aspects of an individual's story (e.g., ethnography) has the potential to help document the reality of Queer individuals' experiences within engineering (Leyva et al., 2016).

The recommendations emerging from the literature clearly point to a need for pedagogical changes to increase inclusivity within STEM classrooms. Faculty must increase their awareness and understanding of Queer identities and issues, known as allied competencies (Jones et al., 2014), to support their ability to foster a safe and inclusive classroom community for Queer students (Cooper and Brownell, 2016; Hughes, 2018). The major component of allied competencies needed in this work have been operationalized and measured (Jones et al., 2014; Lopez-Saez et al., 2020; López-Sáez et al., 2022) to include *knowledge and awareness* about the experiences of queer people, *openness and support* of collective action, and *oppression awareness* by understanding privilege and the daily injustices that shape Queer life experiences. These competencies can be developed and refined through participation in Safe Zone workshops and active involvement in organizations like oSTEM (Out in STEM; Cooper and Brownell, 2016; Kersey and Voigt, 2021). Queer identity affirming teaching practices that have the potential to provide an inclusionary space for Queer postsecondary STEM students include providing space for students to share their identity and pronouns, incorporating examples of Queer scientists in the curriculum, and challenging gender-based biases (Leyva et al., 2016; Kersey and Voigt, 2021).

2.2 Queer theory

Queer theory was adopted for our study because of its focus on achieving equity for Queer individuals across a variety of contexts (McWilliams and Penuel, 2017). Queer theory aims to disrupt binary assumptions of gender and sexuality by questioning processes that "define and categorize people, ideas, identities, and institutions" (Gunckel, 2009, p. 63). Similar to Kersey and Voigt, we avoided "placing boundaries around categories like *STEM* and *Queer* and opted to let our participants decide if these words applied to them or not" (2021, p.736). We also disrupt binary assumptions of gender and sexuality to consider whose perspectives may be missing in learning space and how those views might impact understanding and outcomes (Waid, 2023).

It was important that we situate our work within the framing of Queer theory because we do not want to focus simply on the acceptance of those in the Queer community by the cisgender, heterosexist majority, but rather on questioning discourses that "position Queer identity as excluded and irrelevant to the pursuit of STEM" (Voigt, 2020, p. 266). The questioning stance that Queer theory advocates for allows us to more effectively address the systemic issues that lead to chilly and overtly hostile climates for Queer students in STEM learning spaces (Hughes, 2018). By investigating how Queer STEM students navigate these less accepting spaces, we intend to pinpoint what specific issues span different spaces within higher education and focus on the assets Queer students bring to these spaces. Applying Queer theory to education significantly benefits everyone, not just those who identify as Queer (Gunckel, 2009). It opens new knowledge and ways of understanding that may centralize, but also extends beyond the lives and experiences of those that identify as Queer (Gunckel, 2009; McWilliams and Penuel, 2017).

3 Methods

3.1 Study design

This study is intended to elevate and advocate for the voices of Queer STEM individuals within the realm of higher education. The emphasis on sharing and amplifying these voices align with the transformative paradigm, because it utilizes an asset-based lens when focusing on populations that experience discrimination and oppression from dominant cultural forces, in this case those students who have a Queer spectrum identity (Mertens, 2010). The findings from this study and a "call to action" were presented to the Hagler University LGBTQ commission as a mechanism for transformative change. In addition, we acknowledge the ways in which our research design does not fully align with the transformative paradigm given the limited relationship development with our participants; however, members of the Queer community were a part of the development, implementation, and analysis via the research team composition (see Section 3.4 Positionality). We leveraged a mixed-methods design approach drawing primarily from semi-structured qualitative interviews but also included a quantitative component referred to as the exclusion-irrelevancy plane (see Figure 1) whereby students placed and described the relevancy/irrelevancy and inclusion/exclusion toward their Queer identity within different spaces in higher education (Voigt, 2020). Therefore, the design of the study is classified as mixed methods as it draws on the collection, analysis, and blending of qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell et al., 2011). More specifically, the mixed methods design can be classified as a complementarity mixed methods design as this study works to

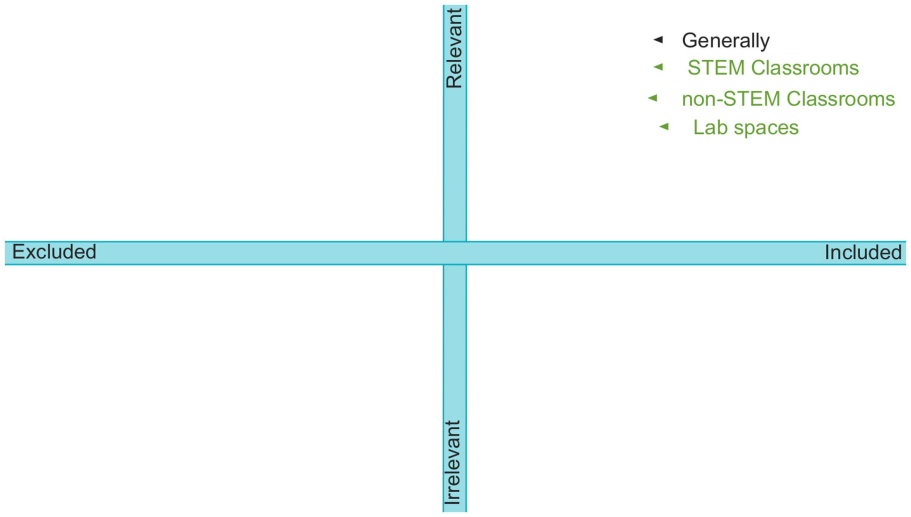

FIGURE 1
Participants placed how relevant/irrelevant their queer identity felt and how included/excluded they felt in four spaces: generally, STEM classrooms, non-STEM classrooms, and lab spaces.

provide a more holistic understanding of Queer STEM students in higher education (Creamer, 2017).

3.2 Participants and context of interviews

Students were recruited from an R1, predominantly white institution (PWI) located in South Carolina within the United States, referred to as Hagler[1] University. We used the following inclusion criteria for participant recruitment and selection: currently enrolled during the Spring 2022 semester at Hagler University, self-identified as Queer, and pursuing a STEM degree. Snowball sampling and university list-servs were used to recruit participants, resulting in 11 participants in total. A summary of participants including their pseudonym, pronouns, major, sexuality, gender, and a self-description (using the question "what three words would you use to describe yourself?") is included in Table 1.

The 11 semi-structured interviews took place over Zoom to adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols as well as to easily record participant affect and download a transcript from each interview. The interview incorporated background questions on participants' "coming out" journeys, experiences within different spaces at their current institution, and how they perceive their Queer identities within these spaces (see Appendix A for protocol). Additionally, the interview included three interactive tasks using Google JamBoards for students to talk through their reasoning as they positioned how they perceived their Queer identity in different environments in higher education on a one-dimensional scale of included/excluded, a one-dimensional scale of relevancy/irrelevancy, and a two-dimensional excluded/irrelevancy space (Figure 1). Each interview lasted between 37 min and 1 h and every participant responded to the question using the two-dimensional excluded/irrelevancy space.

To attend to differences and acknowledge the lived experiences of our participants, quotes will be used to explain the salient points of each theme. Participants are also addressed using the pseudonyms and pronouns that they selected in Table 1.

3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used as the primary qualitative data analysis method because of its accessibility and ease of use when formulating patterns across multiple data sources (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2012). A robust data analysis plan was developed (Green et al., 2007; Braun and Clarke, 2012) that incorporated the four major characteristics of a high-quality paper: immersion in the data, thoroughly coding the data, developing categories from the produced codes, and creating themes that accurately reflect the data. These four characteristics provided depth to the thematic analysis process and were divided into six different phases: (1) Familiarizing Yourself With the Data, (2) Generating Initial Codes, (3) Searching for Themes, (4) Reviewing Potential Themes, (5) Defining and Naming Themes, and (6) Producing the Report (Braun and Clarke, 2012). A description of each phase is included in the sections below and is visually depicted in Figure 2.

3.3.1 Familiarizing yourself with the data

After interviews were recorded and transcribed, the entire research team initially reviewed one transcript (Horseshoe Crab) separately. The remaining 10 interviews were divided among the research team in pairs of undergraduate and graduate students. Two of the three pairs included members of the Queer community to engage in member checking. Almost every pair contained someone who conducted an interview providing each team with more insight

1 Hagler was a chief of the Catawba Native American tribe from 1754 to 1763. We choose this pseudonym to recognize the ways in which the ancestral lands were stolen from native communities and given under the auspices of "land-grant" universities.

TABLE 1 Description of participants self-described identities.

#	Pseudonym	Pronouns	Major	Sexuality	Gender	Self-description
1	Chase	they/them	Plant & Environmental Sciences	Pansexual	Non-binary or Genderfluid	"Under the trans umbrella"
2	Horseshoe Crab	she/her	Mathematical Science	Lesbian	Non-binary or Genderfluid	Bitch, Sympathetic, Lesbian
3	Sheldon	he/him	Electrical Engineering	Gay	Cis-man	Black, Friendly, Nerdy, Logical
4	Blaise	they/them	Psychology	Gay	Non-binary or Genderfluid	Me, Open, Upstanding
5	Chris	they/them	Forestry Resource Management	Queer	Agender	Loyal, Inquisitive, Passionate
6	Cass	she/her	Mechanical Engineering	Lesbian	Cis-woman	Loyal, Fun, Hard Working
7	Sam	she/they	Architecture	Questioning (Asexual, Lesbian, or Pansexual)	Cis-woman, Non-binary or Genderfluid	Anxious, Different, Open-Minded
8	Niko	they/them	Conservation Biology	Aromantic	Trans-man, Non-binary or Genderfluid	Inquisitive, Kind, Queer
9	Alex	she/her	Mathematical Science	Bisexual	Cis-woman	Independent, Determined, Active
10	Emma	she/her	Computer Science	Lesbian	Cis-woman	Blunt, Pragmatic, Layered (like an onion not a parfait)
11	Phin	he/him	Animal & Veterinary Science	Gay	Cis-man	Joyful, Crazy, Weird, Passionate

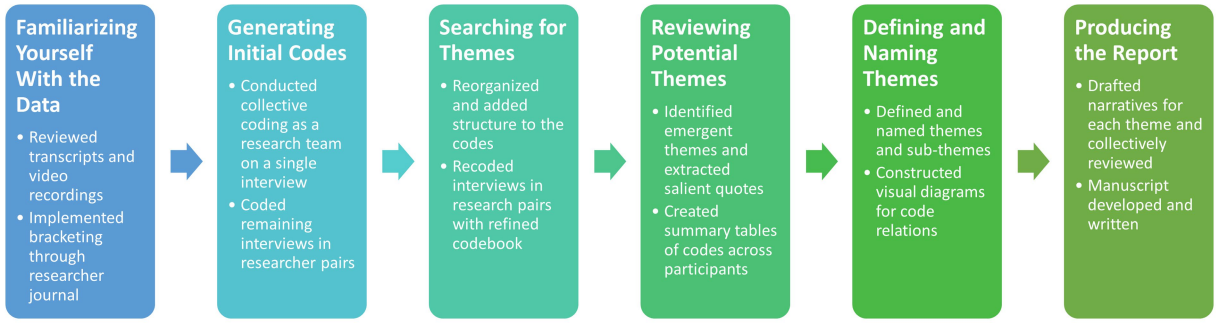

FIGURE 2
Visual depiction and summary of the six stages of thematic analysis that guided the research study.

into the data, an important piece of the research team immersing themselves in data (Green et al., 2007). Every pair familiarized themselves with the interviews by rewatching the recordings, reading the transcripts multiple times, and actively taking notes on pieces of information that stood out in the individual interview. By actively reading through transcripts and drawing out pieces of important large-scale information, the team had references to revisit when coding the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Additionally, during the familiarization stage, the team bracketed in a research journal any personal reactions they had to what they were listening to and reading the transcripts.

3.3.2 Generating initial codes

Throughout the coding process, the research team utilized MAXQDA software as a convenient way to import, code, and share data across the team. Initially, all members of the research team individually inductively coded one interview (Horseshoe Crab). The codebooks from the one interview were merged, reconciled, and redistributed as a guiding codebook for the rest of the interviews. All of the interviews were coded by referencing the initial codebook and adding codes specific to new units of meaning in new interviews. Once every interview was coded, the new codebooks were merged to create a codebook that captured the whole data set.

3.3.3 Searching for themes

The codebook was reorganized into clusters of codes relaying similar, the same, or related information. Codes that were the same or had similar units of meaning were collapsed into a singular code by using constant comparison between transcripts (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Codes that were related were categorized under larger headings. These categories and clusters of codes within each category provided insight into the frequency with which the codes were being used. Frequency is a valuable initial determinant of a theme but was cross-referenced with the research question to make sure the theme was relevant (Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Based on the frequency of each category and the codes within each category, themes started to emerge from the data. After developing categories in the codebook, the coded transcripts were recoded to incorporate the newly robust codebook. To prevent bias around emerging themes, the research team did not code blank transcripts to prevent preconceived theme development. By recoding the transcripts with additional categorical codes, emerging themes became more evident across the data set.

3.3.4 Reviewing potential themes

Once each transcript was recoded with additional categorical codes, quotes were pulled out from each participant's transcript and sorted under each emerging theme. The collection of quotes for each participant was summarized under each emerging theme to fully capture how the participant connected to the theme. Tables were created for each emerging theme and each participant had their own column to help visualize themes across all participants. By using the table, it was easier to visualize how participants connected to the emerging themes and how each emerging theme connected to the other. During the review process, we identified varying interpretations of individual themes and how they connected, collapsed themes that did not have enough data to support them, and reworded themes to better encapsulate the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

3.3.5 Defining and naming themes

Themes were summarized to ensure there was enough depth and data to support the findings. Data that was already selected in Phase 4 was reviewed and quotes that best demonstrated the theme were selected to illustrate the collective narrative of participant voice. Analysis of the findings weaved together participant narratives and focused on analyzing the data with a Queer Theory lens. Each potential theme was connected to tangential themes and some themes turned into sub-themes under more robust themes. Themes were rewritten with the intent to tell a story that captured every participant's experience and connection to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

3.3.6 Producing the report

The report was written simultaneously as the thematic analysis process was taking place and consistently edited depending on the new findings throughout the thematic analysis process.

3.4 Positionality

MV identifies as a white cisgender gay or Queer man with disciplinary backgrounds in Mathematics and Math Education. MAB identifies as a white heterosexual cisgender woman with disciplinary backgrounds in Biomedical Engineering and Math Education. DC identifies as a Black cisgender heterosexual woman with disciplinary backgrounds in Chemistry and Chemistry Education. SO identifies as a white heterosexual cis woman with disciplinary backgrounds in Mathematics and Math Education. CW identifies as a white cisgender heterosexual woman with disciplinary backgrounds in Mechanical Engineering and Spanish Language Studies. ARS identifies as a white and Native American cisgender bisexual woman with disciplinary backgrounds in Genetics, Biochemistry, and Psychology. CH identifies as a white non-binary lesbian (or woman-adjacent) with an academic background in Biochemistry. CH is currently pursuing an M.D. with an intended career in obstetrics and gynecology.

Understanding our positionalities and making these apparent throughout the research process supports the validity and reliability of our findings. This was enacted by having the Queer identified researchers develop the interview protocol to centralize the questions and experiences of Queer individuals. Queer identified researchers also conducted the interviews with Queer student participants to support comfort and understanding during the data collection. During the coding and analysis, where possible, we paired Queer identified researchers with non-Queer identified researchers to code and reconcile the data to support communicative validity of our code book. During the writing phase, all of the researchers contributed and reviewed the manuscript to ensure it captured our beliefs and framing of the research findings.

4 Results

There were three main mechanisms or navigational strategies that Queer STEM students in this study leveraged to support their sense of safety and belonging in higher education: *Environmental evaluations*, *Psychological identity calculations*, and *Behavioral actions*. Environmental evaluations encompassed strategies to read the environments for Queer safety. Psychological identity calculations encompassed the internal cognitive processes that students described they would execute before taking an action. Behavioral actions encompassed the strategies and overt acts that students used to navigate higher education spaces. Each of these themes and their sub-themes is discussed in greater detail in the following sections and visually presented in Figure 3. We note at the onset of our results that few students conveyed a sense of thriving in higher education, most discussing personal safety or belonging, which may be an indication that the environment has not yet satisfied the basic safety needs for Queer students in higher education.

4.1 Environmental evaluations

Participants in this study were keenly aware and adept at performing assessments and evaluations of their local environment to attend to factors that might indicate the level of inclusion and safety of their Queer identity within the space. These evaluations were performed constantly in the moment, were often re-assessed with additional context, and built upon larger societal and historical discourses about Queerness in the United States and within

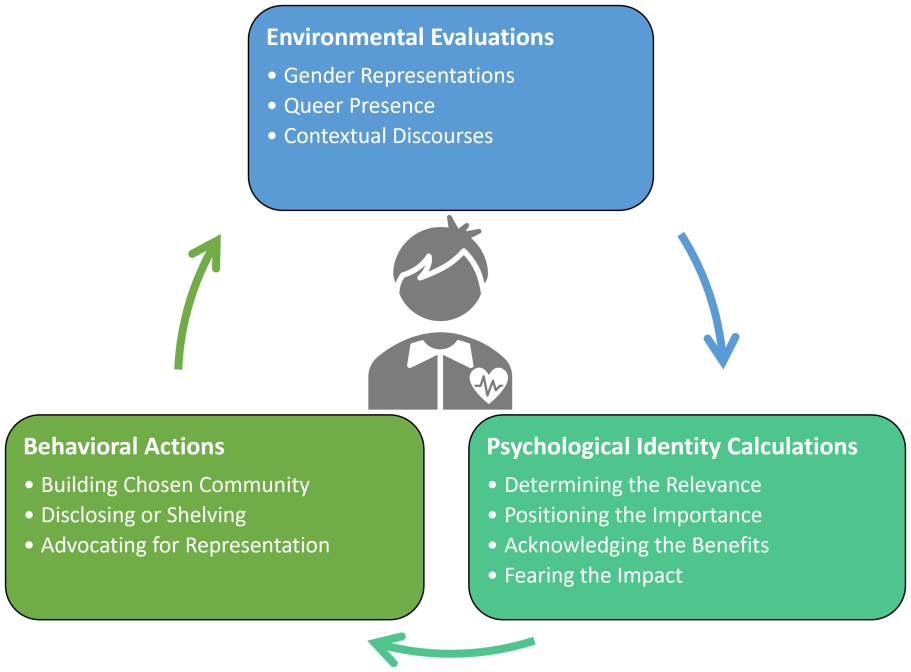

FIGURE 3
Visual model of Queer STEM students navigational strategies in higher education environments.

STEM. Three major sub-themes that guided students evaluations were: *Gender representation, Queer presence*, and *Contextual discourses*.

4.1.1 Gender representation

Eight of the participants in the study discussed how gender representation, and specifically the presence of cisgender white men in spaces, was an indicator of less Queer inclusion. Furthermore, it was not only the gender representation of the environment, but how gender interplayed and intersected with issues of race and the participants sexual identity. Participants described attending to the environmental factor of gender representation often using various vocabulary such as "STEM is very straight cis male dominated…boys club," "white male people…dominating in that class," "computer science…is like very, very male dominated…toxically straight," "dominated by white men," "straight men," "my major is very like classic cishet white generally um country boys." It is worth noting how much of the language included the terminology of "dominating," a descriptor that conveys power, and subjugation of Queer people. Students were evaluating the environment for the representation of gender diversity as an indicator of their safety. Chase (Pansexual Non-binary) captured this sentiment saying, "it just feels sort of scary because I do not want to get targeted by someone for being different and Queer."

Queer women especially noted how the intersection of gender and sexual identity impacted the way they understood the environment. For instance, Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) discussed if you told a straight man your sexual identity they would "assume they can talk about women in a certain way…misogynistic and stuff" which can result in issues developing genuine connections with other students. In a similar vein, Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) mentioned how straight men can be exclusionary to Queer women who do not have a sexual interest in them:

> *there's a lot of men in there that normally do not geehaw[2] with Queer women or just women that don't show a lot of interest in them, and they are more dominating in that classroom…lean towards the superiority complex and don't really seem open to allowing Queers into their spaces.*

Emma (Lesbian Cis-woman) described this type of environment as "toxically straight," often because many guys have "never spoken to a girl before or at least they act like it" and thus any sort of interaction with them appears that you are "giving him the time of the day." Emma said this can be "difficult to navigate" as they do not want to out themselves but they do not have another reason to provide why they are not sexually/romantically interested in them.

However, we should caution that it is not enough to address toxic masculinity and increase the representation of cisgender women in STEM to improve the environment for Queer students, we must move beyond the gender binary. As an example, Chase (Pansexual Non-binary) discussed how their automatic invitation and inclusion in a women in engineering program while helpful did not feel inclusive:

> *Especially the people that I know that don't identify as female but are in the [women in engineering] email list or [program] I know that for them that's really hard… I was assigned a [women in engineering] mentor and it did feel weird to me because I don't identify as a woman. And that's something that my freshman engineering professor said, he was like we need more women in engineering, and I was just going with it, because it's specifically for*

2 A phrase from the Southern United States meaning, to get along.

> *women and so they just take everyone who was born female at birth, who you know, has that gender marker and if they're in engineering they will automatically put you in [program] with a mentor and I can't change how people perceive.*

4.1.2 Queer presence

All of the participants in the study discussed how they evaluated the environment by attending to the presence of other Queer individuals (or Queer-inclusive allies) within the space; yet, this was not just a passive action of attending to Queer visibility but was often an active result of building and developing Queer-inclusive communities in the spaces around them (discussed further in the *Building Chosen Community* section). Given the sometimes less visible nature of Queer identity, determining Queer presence often necessitated active strategies to assess the Queerness or inclusiveness of others present in the environment. Queer students evaluated the presence of Queer individuals usually through social media, friend groups developed outside of academic spaces, or through connections with roommates.

Students used social media (TikTok, Tinder, and Instagram) to identify individuals within their physical proximity that they used to determine Queer presence. For instance, Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) described how her friend created a group chat with all of the Queer women that she knew from Tinder. Another student discussed how seeing pronouns on a peers' Instagram page was a sign of inclusion that put them at ease. Given that Queer undergraduate students are mostly digital natives, the ways in which social media and technology can be leveraged to proactively foster these types of environments is an area of needed research.

Seven of the students specifically discussed the nature of finding other Queer individuals in higher education resulting in an "instant bond," and mutual understanding. Chase (Pansexual Non-binary) described this connection in the following way:

> *instantly connect with people in your community, if you find another Queer person in your major or in STEM or in your dorm … you normally have an instant connection, because you know you're a part of that same community and that always that can lead to you know a friendship, a lot quicker than it would like if I had met another random person who wasn't in the Queer community*

Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) described this connection in a similar way, where you have mutual understanding of the struggles of being Queer and coming out, which results in "instantly getting each other" and when this happens within your major there is an even deeper level of understanding.

It is worth noting that an instant connection with someone who shares a marginalized identity is not unique to Queer individuals, the same has been documented with race (Jackson and Hui, 2017), gender (Lane et al., 2023), language (Calleros and Zahner, 2023), and other marginalized identities (Boyd, 2023). However, what is unique is that Queer individuals have often found community and safety with others through sexual intimacy or acknowledgment of their sexual desires. Hence why normative expectations or discourses that degenerate openness and discussions of sexuality (Voigt, 2020) are a systemic barrier to the inclusion of Queer students in STEM.

Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary), Blaise (Gay Non-binary), Sheldon (Gay Cis-man), and Chris (Queer Agender) all discussed how their roommates or living situation were a source of inclusion or indicator of Queer presence. Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary)shared:

> *I'm not going to compromise, myself in like a private space for anyone. So you know we both [roommate] became friends right off the bat. It was really great, we got really lucky because half the time we feel like we're going to get murdered by anyone else on our floor.*

Blaise (Gay Non-binary) described their roommates as really accepting, and Sheldon (Gay Cis-man) discussed how their roommates (former high school friends) were the first they came out to and how they would hang out together. Chris (Queer Agender) discussed the more formalized support of having an LGBT living and learning community within the residence hall of the university, "seeing the community that was created for that in the first class of students we had in there, shows that this sort of relevance is going to impact people's day-to-day as soon as they get to college."

4.1.3 Contextual discourses

Queer students evaluated the local environment for socially constructed contextual discourses related to Queer identity and inclusion. We chose to highlight salient contextual discourses related to academic disciplines and higher education settings. Disciplinary discourses are the subtle, embedded, and normative practices within a discipline that often convey to students what is valued and important within that field. Most participants described how they evaluated STEM spaces as feeling more exclusionary than other spaces. We can see this in Figure 4, based on the location students placed themselves on the exclusion-irrelevancy space within STEM and Lab spaces being shifted more into the exclusionary plane compared to Non-STEM spaces and generally. Students described feeling more excluded in STEM because these spaces are unaccommodating to Queer identities, lack representation within the field, or the objectives and norms within STEM classrooms are not aligned with their Queer identity. Such beliefs may capture both a perception of STEM as a discipline that is aligned with cisheteronormative beliefs (Leyva et al., 2022) and learned homonegativity internalized about oneself (López-Sáez et al., 2022).

Participants described general patterns in which they felt their Queer identity was not accepted or accommodated in STEM spaces. Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) described this feeling as, "It feels like I'm not 100% myself in these spaces. It feels like a certain mold to be seen as competent in these spaces and a lot of times unfortunately my Queerness gets pushed to the side." Notice how Cass described being seen as competent in STEM as not aligned with also being seen as Queer. Contributing to this feeling of exclusion, students described how a lack of representation or not seeing other Queer individuals in STEM was an indicator of the exclusionary nature of those spaces. Queer representation within STEM is related to the sub-theme of Queer presence, but is more closely linked to the curriculum and professionals already in the field, as compared to peers in the same environment. One of the most frequently described indicators of Queerness being excluded in STEM was the misalignment of Queer identity with the typical norms or objectives in STEM environments that are goal-oriented and focused on technical tasks. Sam

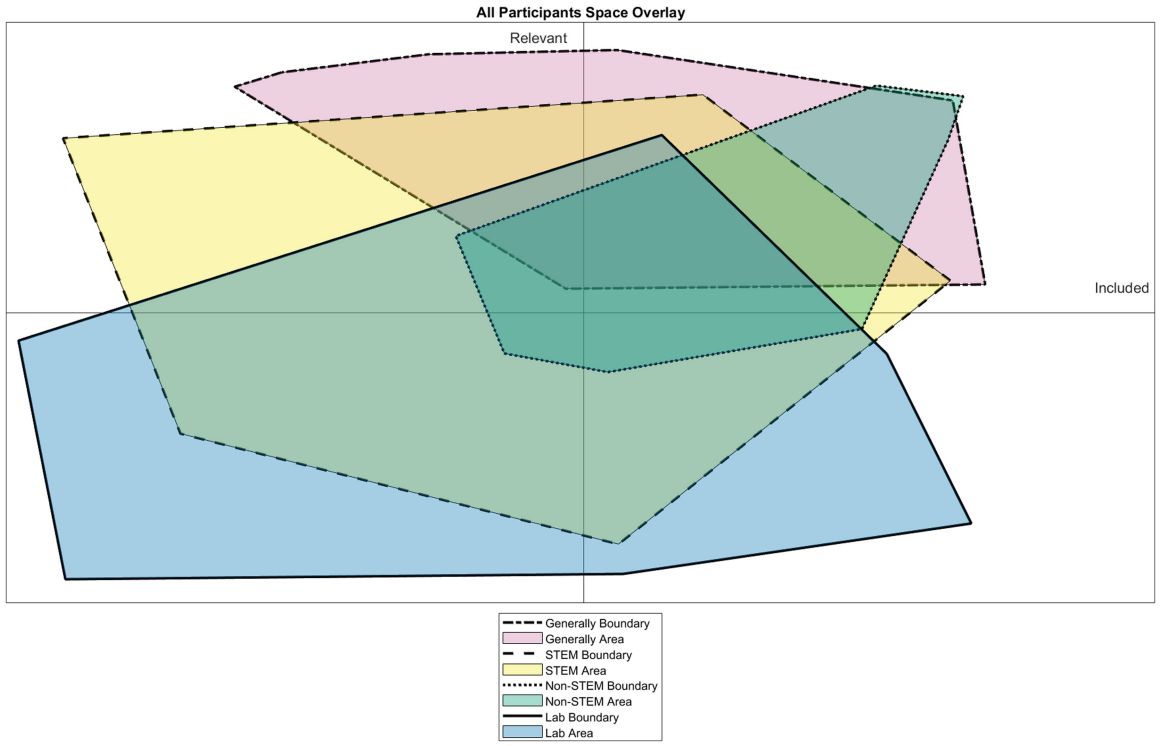

FIGURE 4
Visual depiction of the bounded area where the participants placed themselves with regards to the feelings of exclusion and irrelevance of their Queer Identity the area bounded by STEM spaces and Lab spaces primarily reside toward the exclusionary space (quadrants II and III) with Lab spaces being described as more irrelevant than any other space.

(Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) for instance described STEM as "doing what you need to do" and is not a place to "talk with random people or work with them." Emma (Lesbian Cis-woman) said she definitely feels excluded in STEM as a Queer person because the topic "never comes up," "not acknowledged," or "glossed over." Chris (Queer Agender) described avoiding discussion of Queer topics in STEM because there is a "goal" and "we just do not talk about it [Queerness]."

A few students described moments of STEM environments feeling more inclusionary, and attributed this largely to a strong STEM identity, which fostered a sense of belonging and community. Feeling more included because of this STEM identity emerged in the interviews, with Chris (Queer Agender) discussing their love for their major, Phin (Gay Cis-man) feeling that their field was more accepting, and Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) mentioning feeling a connection to their field. Chris (Queer Agender), Blaise (Gay Non-binary) and Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) described how they feel slightly more included in STEM classrooms because they knew people in their classes. Blaise also viewed science-oriented people as more open minded to the Queer community, as they actively try and understand them. As such it is worth noting that a strong STEM identity or affiliation mitigated feelings of exclusion toward the students' Queer identity.

Participants generally expressed that non-STEM spaces feel more welcoming and inclusionary because the assignments or topics of the course were more aligned with discussions of Queer identity or they had experiences with inclusive non-STEM instructors. However, non-STEM classrooms were not viewed as a monolith of inclusion, and students had varying perspectives on which subjects were more or less inclusive. Religion, Business, History, and General Education courses were described as more exclusionary, while Art, Literature, and English were viewed as more inclusive disciplines. The majority of participants explained that non-STEM courses provided the space to reflect on their own personal identities in assignments and directly tie their identities to the material in class. Chris (Queer Agender), Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary), Emma (Lesbian Cis-woman), Alex (Bisexual Cis-woman), Blaise (Gay Non-binary), all described non-STEM being to some degree more inclusive because Queerness is "something that is acknowledged," there are "way more discussions, representations," "more conversations about it," or because they are "designed to be inclusive." Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) and Chris both mentioned particular experiences in non-STEM classes where they had instructors who were explicitly inclusive, used pronouns, and stated the classroom was a "safe space" where "we do not judge." Both of them felt this was not typical of instructors and not all instructors can be "this amazing." It is striking and somewhat tragic how instructors using inclusive instructional practices is an outlier for the Queer students in this study.

Participants described different non-academic spaces with various levels of comfort and feelings of inclusion. When there was a feeling of anonymity within the environment, Queer students viewed these as more inclusive. For instance, large academic study spaces and libraries were described as being more inclusive because everyone is working on something individually and Queer identity is not salient. In contrast, the gym evoked negative experiences and strong feelings of exclusion from every participant because of the people who inhabit the gym, the decisions about what to wear to the gym, and negative

past experiences. Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) and Chase (Pansexual Non-binary) reflected on how there are norms around what "guys" and "girls" wear to the gym and how this can be challenging to navigate. Cass shared "I'm not wearing what other girls wear so that kind of makes me feel weird [because]... my Queerness is very obvious when I go to the gym." Similarly for Chase, "All of the guys sort of look the same, wear the same thing. The girls sort of you know, always in leggings and so it just feels really weird because I never really know…" The exclusionary nature of the gym we posit is also because of the embodied nature of this environment that appears hostile toward the performance of Queerness.

4.2 Psychological identity calculations

Queer students performed various psychological identity calculations after evaluating the environment to then inform behavioral actions. Queer students described psychological identity calculations related to the perceived relevance of Queer identity to STEM, the personal importance of their Queer identity, possible benefits of Queerness within STEM, and fears or risks of Queerness in STEM.

4.2.1 Determining the relevance of queer identity in STEM

Most participants in this study expressed beliefs that their own Queer identity was irrelevant to STEM, but this varied by context. This theme differs from the contextual discourses about STEM, as it shifts from the environment to the internalized beliefs about Queer identity – which is often a cyclic nature enforced through those exclusionary discourses. For example, Emma (Lesbian Cis-woman) discussed that in her computer science lab there is an intense focus on coding and not much dialog at all so her Queer identity does not feel relevant *to her* in those particular spaces. In Horseshoe Crab's (Lesbian Non-binary) lab experiences she also felt that her Queer identity was irrelevant while working in groups, and she chose to work as fast as possible to get finished and out of the space. Some participants described a desire for their Queer identity to be more relevant in STEM, but ultimately personally minimized its relevance in STEM contexts. Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) stated, "I'm just working... unfortunately my Queerness gets pushed to the side." Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) and Chris (Queer, Agender) also emphasized a personal focus on their work and learning that minimized how they felt about the relevance of their Queer identity in STEM spaces. Chris shared, "Being Queer is a large part of my identity, so I do not want to hide it, but as a student just learning course material it's not important." These participants' statements further exemplify how Queer students often believe or internalize ideas that their Queer identity is irrelevant in STEM.

4.2.2 Positioning the importance of queer identity

How individuals positioned the importance of their Queer identities impacted how they navigated spaces in higher education. Most individuals expressed the importance of their Queer identities citing that their Queer identities were "a very large portion of who I am," "important to me," and "a major part of who I am, who I've become." The participants who explicitly recognized the importance of their Queer identity were motivated by internal validation and less affected by a lack of external validation from non-affirming environments. Sheldon (Gay Cis-man) defined internal validation as "being grounded in that identity" and his success in navigating higher education was accomplished by grounding himself in his Queer identity, recognizing the importance it holds for himself. He attributed his success in Electrical Engineering to his "own self-confidence, instead of trying to get external validation."

Similarly to Sheldon, three other participants expressed how the personal importance of their Queer identity was a form of internal validation. Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) described their Queer identity as "important to me" and continued to say, "I never felt bad about being Queer." Phin's (Gay Cis-man) discussion of self-acceptance positioned his Queer identity as an asset he wanted to share with others, "I was like this is me this is who I need to show to everyone." Blaise (Gay Non-binary) similarly shared that their identity feels relevant and important to themselves and recognized that impacts their interactions with others "...in general, I feel like it is who I am as a person, so I feel like everything should be relevant to people…like they identify this way so that way they do not try to be offensive at all." Although Phin and Blaise both discussed the importance of sharing their Queer identities with others, they were motivated internally by their own self-acceptance and strength in identity formation. By positioning their Queer identity as something that is important to themselves, participants are removing the opportunity for non-affirming spaces to externally dictate the importance of their Queer identities.

Four of the participants recognized that to be fully accepting of their own Queer identities and see it as important they had to overcome internalized homophobia; homophobia created by external forces relaying hateful messages about Queer identities and not questioning heteronormative views. Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) described her coming out by saying, "I had the internalized homophobia… of you still have to be straight, but also, deep down, you still like girls." Horseshoe Crab's internalized homophobia caused her to question her gender as well, citing "it would definitely be a lot easier to meet, date, marry other women if I was a boy, but again that's not me." Sheldon (Gay Cis-man) had similar experiences recounting that he used to "hate [his sexuality] so much but then [he] was like well…this is just how it is." Phin's (Gay Cis-man) internalized homophobia was created because "everybody was always like [being Queer] is negative," but eventually they "just did not care anymore" and lessened the influence of the internalized homophobia. The tension of internalized homophobia caused participants to grapple with their acceptance of their Queer identities and impacted how participants viewed themselves. Blaise (Gay Non-binary) specifically described their "journey from not accepting [their Queer identities] to accepting [them as] very mentally tolling." The internalized homophobia participants experienced imposed an increased cognitive load on participants.

4.2.3 Acknowledging the benefits of queer identity in STEM

Only four of the participants explicitly talked about the benefits of Queer Identity in STEM even with a research design and interview protocol that was intentionally asset-based. The remaining seven participants could not or did not explicitly mention any benefits of Queer identity throughout the entirety of their interview. Chris (Queer Agender), Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary), Niko

(Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man), and Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) talked about how a benefit of Queer identity is in having a "unique perspective" (Chris) where they "have different ways to look at things [and] different ways to solve problems" (Sam) and are maybe "more willing to like look at different solutions for different problems in a sense" (Horseshoe Crab). Horseshoe Crab also took this idea further and talked about how she leveraged her Queer Identity and experience to bolster her arguments in a forensic competition in high school as she:

> *could explicitly state that, like as the Queer woman, as a lesbian woman, as someone who's struggled with gender identity, that these topics are valid and they should be looked at more and more instead of just being pushed to the side for something else.*

Each of these participants shared how they can leverage their Queer Identity to bring a "unique perspective" to the table to allow for "different ways of thinking." Niko expanded on the benefits throughout the interview stating that the benefit "[is] not just a diverse perspective … [but] it can be easier to [see] where an organization falls short in including other kinds of diversity, when you are one of the kinds of diversity." This drives home Niko's belief that "there is a strength to being a Queer person in general that can transfer to whatever field you are in" and that strength as Niko said, is not just specific to STEM.

Several of the participants answered the question about benefits of being Queer in STEM with outright denial. This can be seen in Sheldon's (Gay Cis-man) response of "Nothing really" or Emma's (Lesbian Cis-woman) response of "In Computer Science as a female? No." Phin (Gay Cis-man) on the other hand shared that he "[does not] know if there's specifically any strengths. I think there's less disadvantage. But I do not know if there's any strengths." These responses by Emma, Sheldon, and Phin highlight that even when asked specifically for the benefits or strengths to being Queer in STEM they cannot identify a strength or benefit. And while Phin explained a strength as "less disadvantage" what he is identifying is still a disadvantage of "feel[ing] like an outsider."

4.2.4 Fearing the impact of queer identity in STEM

Each participant who was asked, "what sort of fears do you have while being a Queer person in STEM?" responded with at least one fear. The majority of participants referenced "the general fear of just doors being closed to me" (Niko), "[that] they will not accept me" (Horseshoe Crab), "discrimination" (Sheldon), "[being] judged or treated differently than the other people" (Phin), "people being more rude" (Chris), "prejudice, being judged" (Cass), not wanting "people to either ignore me or treat me any differently" (Sam), and "doing any sort of research or anything, then people might try to discredit me for it because of who I am as a person" (Blaise). To capture the unique insights of the participants, it is important to recognize the variations of their fears. As such, we identified four salient fears about the impact of a Queer identity in STEM, which included: fears of changing relationships, concerns of safety, being viewed as incompetent, and fears of being stigmatized.

Four participants discussed their fear of changing relationships when interacting with peers who learn about their Queer identity. Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) expressed her fear of working with individuals in her Physics lab, describing it as "a little bit daunting" to interact with "all these other people that you are going to be with for likely the next couple years who I do not know." Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) discussed past experiences of disclosing her Non-binary lesbian identity before entering university and those peers "not enjoying doing work with me or..stopped communicating" but through current experiences at their university that has not occurred so they are feeling more included. Sheldon (Gay Cis-man) described experiences with homophobic classmates that led them to not trusting the person moving forward. Determining the safety of a peer and worrying about changing relationships is an impactful psychological practice for Queer individuals that is linked with mental health and trauma (Winfrey and Perry, 2021). For instance, Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) feared that their "Queer identity being taken negatively probably impacted [their] mental health." The psychological processes of sorting through unknown relationships allows the participants to sift through people to determine, as Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) described who "will not murder [them] on site" and avoid making "an enemy for the next four years." The fear of going from a neutral peer relationship to enemies or a friendly peer relationship to neutral impacted how participants psychologically prepared to interact with their peers.

Participants often intertwined the fear of changing relationships with concerns of safety when discussing their Queer identities. Most participants alluded to a fear of safety when describing the tension of revealing their Queer identities. Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) elaborated on a time where she "did not feel safe enough to [reveal her Queer identity]... since this was the first time meeting" meeting the person. Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) explicitly warns the interviewer:

> *You always have to be aware of the people around you because half the time you don't know if you say something to someone or just make an offhand comment, they just go 'oh you're LGBTQ' and then they could flip a switch. If you're not careful.*

Other fears participants referenced included: "getting attacked in some way" (Niko, Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man), "get murdered by anyone else on our floor" (Sam, Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary), and "I cannot really trust this person anymore" (Sheldon, Gay Cis-man). The threatening language associated with other's responses to participants revealing their Queer identities provide context for why participants grapple with the tension of revealing their Queer identities and their safety.

Two participants frequently feared being perceived as incompetent or unprofessional in their current majors or in future occupations. Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) dissected her experience as a Mechanical Engineering major citing that she may "not [be] viewed as competent" or that "they underestimate [her] for being a woman and a lesbian." Cass's recognition of her intersecting identities provided insight into her psychological processes surrounding her identities:

> *It kind of makes me feel good when the guys ask me questions because it makes me think that they do think I'm capable of this. But, for some reason, even though I know that I am capable, I'm just worried that other people won't see me as that for some reason.*

Alex (Bisexual Cis-woman) similarly had concerns of being "perceived as less professional" because of her Queer identity and the ways in which "gender expression can be seen as not cookie cutter."

Alex's fear of expressing her gender identity via outward appearance and how that could be negatively perceived as unprofessional affects how she perceives herself within her future occupation. Emphasizing that "for [the Queer] community [dressing as themselves is] a little more meaningful than [dressing what others would perceive as unprofessional]."

Lastly, seven participants delved into their internalized fears of being stigmatized in the STEM community for their Queer identities. Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) compared the stigma of being Queer in STEM as "similar to being a female in a traditionally STEM field" acknowledging that "people are still having trouble getting over that kind of stigma which is ridiculous." Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) similarly felt the weight of the stigma of being Queer through the "constant fear that what if [she] meet[s] the wrong person…and [she] reveal[s] that [she is] Queer to them, and they are weird about it." Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) feared "the stigmas of the normal, they'll treat me different." Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man), Blaise (Gay Non-binary), and Phin (Gay Cis-man) all utilized future-oriented language when discussing assumed stigmatization. Niko said, "I've been very fortunate that I have not *yet* encountered [the stigma of being Queer in STEM]." Phin similarly explained, "I feel like currently I do not think I've experienced anything negative *yet*" and continued to elaborate on the future, "I guess because of the future I'm sure there's going to be different things that I have to experience."

4.3 Behavioral actions

Behavioral actions describe the overt or implicit actions that Queer students would engage with as a navigational strategy within their higher education spaces. These actions were informed by evaluating the environment for a sense of inclusion and performing psychological identity calculations to determine the relevance and risk/benefit of disclosure. Behavioral action sub-themes included: *Building a chosen community, Disclosing or shelving Queer identity,* and *Advocating for representation*.

4.3.1 Building a chosen community

One of the behavioral actions that participants utilized was to foster Queer-inclusive environment by building a chosen community (thus allowing them to determine Queer presence when evaluating the environment). Building a chosen community is a concept analogous to chosen family within Queer communities (Jackson Levin et al., 2020). Queer spectrum students described building a chosen community in different ways which included developing friend groups, choosing certain peers to work with, excluding yourself, or choosing to work individually.

Most of the students discussed the importance of developing friend groups that were supportive and then surrounding yourself with them in higher education settings. The terminology of "supportive," "safe space for me," "include me," "comfortable," and "positive" were often used to describe these friendships. Blaise (Gay Non-binary) described how they, "find a group of people who will try to include me for who I am and they will not pass me off because I'm just a gay person, so I know that I will always have some inclusion." Emma (Lesbian Cis-woman) described jokingly how they would attend "gay parties" and meet a lot of people who they would then see on campus which would then be an indicator of Queer-inclusion within academic settings. Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) described this as finding "a really great group of friends, which I'm very, very lucky to have found. You know it's mostly with my Queer friends. I always feel safe and always always included with them."

One way of building a chosen community was to actively select the peers you work with in a STEM space. Chris (Queer Agender) captured the active nature of this navigational strategy in the following way in which he would, "seek out the spaces that are already there because finding community and finding strength in numbers can make you more confident and you more comfortable to be your own authentic self, no matter what space you are in, to sum it up, find the spaces, you want, and then make room for yourself if you need." Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) talked about how in a classroom setting "normally when you break out into those groups you are allowed to choose who you are with so you are probably going to cho'se people you know you can work better with." However, deciding peers to work with was not universal and Horseshoe Crab described a different orientation when it is a STEM lab setting "I do not care if I'm an individual or if I'm part of the group, I just want to have the work done so I can leave as soon as I can," highlighting how the space and context can influence what choice the individual chooses to make.

Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman), Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary), Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary), and Sheldon (Gay Cis-man) all talked about how their individual characteristics influenced them into choosing to work individually in academic settings. For Cass, choosing to work as an individual was because she is "kind of a shy person …[and] not very good at talking to people in a classroom setting." Sam shared that they "do not have a very easy time talking with most people… [and] so group projects will be very difficult." Other individual characteristics shared were that they are "very introverted" (Sheldon) and "not a very social person" (Horseshoe Crab) therefore leveraging their agency to work alone when they can. Horseshoe Crab added a layer of complexity to her choice as she "does not generally enjoy speaking with many people because of the past few years and traumas, not always related to being Queer."

While these four participants framed their agency as choosing to work individually, Phin (Gay Cis-man) frames his agency as choosing to exclude himself. Explaining that "I'm sure there's been many times where I've been excluded or I wanted to exclude myself … especially around straight men, I do not know. I do not always feel comfortable so like if I knew that it was just going to be a lot of them I probably would be like 'hmmm I do not want to go." Notice how the language the participants used is very different here as Phin explicItly calls out exclusion by others or by himself versus the language about individuality. Chris shared "I'm usually the most Queer person in the room … I've gotten pretty confident and comfortable with it [and] i"s still very obvious that I'm an individual in those settings but like I've made myself an individual so I kind of like take it, you know."

4.3.2 Disclosing and shelving queerness

Participants shared the agency of choice in how, when, and with whom they chose to disclose or shelve their Queer identity. To shelve one's identity was to not talk about it, to avoid difficult conversations around identity, and or to believe that their identity had no place in a space. Disclosing one's identity was to choose who they would come

out to, to leverage physical appearance clues to Queer identity, and or an expressed desire for those to "just know."

One of the ways participants talked about shelving their Queerness indirectly was through the avoidance of difficult identity conversations. For Phin (Gay Cis-man) this meant waiting until they were off to college to come out to their parents as "it does not affect me and they can have their little feelings and I will be out of the house." For others it meant avoiding conversations with peers on campus as "they do not get this quite [and] I did not know if they would understand or not so that gave me a pretty good sign, maybe they would not" (Sam, Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) or "nobody know how to talk about it, so we just do not" (Chris, Queer Agender). Alex (Bisexual Cis-woman) felt that "it's just easier to not bring it up" whereas Phin and Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) felt that "it's not really something that should be talked about [in a job]"(Phin) and that the "culture was you did not talk about your partner at work" (Niko). Emma (Lesbian Cis-woman) instead pointed out how the larger community at Hagler University was avoiding the difficult conversations:

> *only paid lip service to diversity… they want diversity if it makes them look good but they're* not going to pursue it because … they don't want to stir the pot … they're not going to actually pursue [having more LGBTQ students in engineering] even if they say they want to.

Deciding to disclose their Queer identity to the people around them came down to comfortability for many of the participants. Whether it was comfortability in the form of "the people who I talked to regularly" (Alex, bisexual Cis-woman), specifically friends "I just told my friends" (Chase, Pansexual Non-binary), or it was "a group of friends who were all like kind of LGBT all together which I was just very comfortable around them" (Sheldon, gay Cis-man). Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary), Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary), and Blaise (Gay Non-binary) also talked about how they chose to disclose to those around them that they were comfortable with, whereas Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) shared "I am out to most people I know. I've said to my partner before that … if someone cannot tell I'm Queer, I am not doing a good enough job kind of thing." This begins to shed light to another facet in which participants disclose their identity, through physical appearance.

Leveraging the use of their physical appearance whether that be the clothes they wore, the hair style they chose, or the accessories they picked was another common disclosure choice participants talked about. It should be noted that some participants talked about how their physical appearance also made it very obvious that they were Queer and that it did lead to feelings of discomfort, and others often referenced the reactions of others to their action of dressing the way they wished. Chris (Queer Agender), Phin (Gay Cis-man) and Blaise (Gay Non-binary) all talked about "getting weird looks" or "being stared at" due to Phin's "unusual outfits" or Chris's "way I dress" or Blaise's hair as it makes them "a highlighter in a room of pencils." Phin shared about others assuming their identity as "I mean I go around our own campus walking wearing heels and I do not really care." On the other hand, Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) shared "when I did first [visit] my physician right now she assumed I was straight and I did not feel like correcting her … everything I was wearing that day kind of screamed gay to me" this highlights how while Horseshoe Crab felt that they were disclosing their identity through their clothes, the physician still made assumptions about being straight. Finally, it is important to recognize how other people in the larger community that dress in similar ways can impact Queer students. Chase (Pansexual Non-binary) said it perfectly:

> *I don't know if they are in the Queer community but they have pink hair and right now, it feels like I'm the only one with purple or colored hair in [academic building] sometimes so just seeing other people with colored hair … makes me feel less of an outcast.*

4.3.3 Advocating for representation

All participants described the importance and impact of Queer advocacy in STEM. Many shared how increased representation would increase their sense of belonging in STEM places and others described more generally how representation would increase their positive experiences in STEM or the experiences of other Queer students. There was general consensus that representation in STEM spaces was currently low with Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) summarizing it best, "If you think about where you are going to find Queer people in academia, your first thought is generally not going to be STEM." Emma (Lesbian Cis-woman) discussed how it is important to see yourself represented in the spaces and described how meaningful it was the first time she saw a character in a movie that shared a similar identity and background as her own. She speculated that the lack of representation of different identities is a key reason for low retention in STEM fields. "They do not feel supported and they do not see themselves in it." Sam (Questioning Cis-woman Non-binary) also shared that it is important for people who are not Queer to see Queer scientists so they can recognize the competence of Queer individuals in STEM. Niko (Aromantic Non-binary Trans-man) shared a website that they are familiar with called *500 Queer Scientists* that is "aiming to raise awareness of Queer people in STEM where they see themselves represented in STEM." Emma, Sam, and Niko described a concept that has become a common framework for increasing inclusivity in a variety of disciplines called windows and mirrors (Style, 1988). It is important that individuals are able to see themselves (mirrors) represented in spaces and content and see people with different backgrounds than their own to better understand and appreciate different perspectives (windows).

Some students advocated for representation within course materials, curriculum, and instructors. Chris (Queer Agender) specified how representation of Queer scientists could be integrated in coursework. "It would be amazing if there was an opportunity to show research that's being done by Queer, gender Queer scientists." Chris also described how hands-on lab courses can "bring in case studies and identify if the researcher is Queer or non-conforming." They said, "it's natural to talk about the research of any scientist so including Queer scientists should not be a big thing." Knowing that there are other Queer people actively working in the field gives Chris hope that they will find a career in STEM as well. Cass (Lesbian Cis-woman) argued for more Queer faculty. She had an engineering professor who identified as a Queer woman at her previous college and felt that she could relate to her and was more open to asking questions. She experienced a stronger sense of belonging and as a result more meaningful engagement in this course where her identity was represented.

Finally, almost all students reflected on how they themselves could serve as role models and be advocates for the next generation of Queer students in STEM. Alex (Bisexual Cis-woman) shared how she could personally be an advocate by being more vocal about her identity within STEM spaces and in her department. Horseshoe Crab (Lesbian Non-binary) described how she would use forensic competitions in high school as a platform to discuss socio-political issues that impact the Queer community. Chris (Queer Agender) shared that "because my journey to get here was not easy… I feel like I can be a listening ear for other students" and describes being a role model as "being a light for other people."

5 Discussion

Through our analysis in this study, we developed a conceptual model for how Queer STEM students navigate higher educational environments (see Figure 3). We view this model as a cyclical, changing, and contextual framework whereby students are attending to environmental factors, processing psychological considerations, and then deciding on a behavioral action. This process repeats itself as students engage in behavioral actions of advocacy or disclosing their identity, which then impacts their perceptions of the environment, and future psychological considerations. In many ways this model draws parallels between teacher noticing frameworks (König et al., 2022), whereby instructors first must attend to student thinking, interpret the information based on their pedagogical content knowledge, and then requires a responding action from the instructor which could be sequencing content or making student thinking visible. We draw this parallel to teacher noticing to aid the reader who does not share the lived experience of having a Queer identity, to make connections to the fast-paced, quick, and micro-decision making that occurs in instructional practices. Furthermore, professional development is often used as a tool to aid in teacher noticing of asset-based content knowledge in similar fashion whereby Queer students are receiving training and feedback throughout their daily existence within these spaces.

When Queer students are on constant high alert, they describe how the mental load of their Queer identity weighs upon their conscience. Queer students in our study described how they are more acutely aware of their identity when in public or homogenous (white cishet males) groups and have to be more aware of their actions and performance of Queerness (Butler, 2009). Queer students might reveal their Queer identity to others, which can promote a sense of self-integration and personal empowerment (Corrigan and Matthews, 2003; Baiocco et al., 2016); however, the ability and decision to reveal one's Queer identity is often multifaceted and situational. For instance, Toynton (2016) put forth the notion of Queer identity in STEM as the "invisible other," such that being Queer-spectrum is an experience of being the "other" and yet invisible if wished. The invisible nature of Queer identity provides agency to reveal one's identity, while at the same time requiring ongoing decision-making to determine whether and how to disclose this identity. Research indicates that having to navigate coming out in educational spaces creates more emotional and psychological work for Queer students and often results in daily decisions about revealing their sexuality in the classroom (Lopez and Chims, 1993; Eliason, 2019; Savage and Harley, 2009; Toynton, 2016).

Participants in this study discussed the fears about being Queer in STEM and determining if it is a safe environment to share their identities while also conveying tensions of internalized homophobia and questioning the relevance of having a fully humanized self within STEM. Research has shown that sexist attitudes correlate with internalized homophobia or homonegativity (López-Sáez et al., 2022), thus STEM environments may exacerbate these psychological functions given the fields history of sexist attitudes (Saxena et al., 2019), exclusionary practices (Hennessey, 2018), and history of misogyny (Rutherford, 2020). When individuals do not feel as though their identity is relevant or accepted in a space, they will often shelve their queerness to avoid uncomfortable or unsafe situations. In this study, participants downplayed moments of marginalization by following stories of perceived marginalization with a comment that questions whether marginalization took place or minimizes the severity of the marginalization. By downplaying marginalization, participants are attempting to mentally protect themselves from the negative treatment of others. This psychological practice could be harmful to participants as they are taking on the burden of reframing their own negative experiences.

Participants in our study described a desire for increased Queer representation in STEM environments and the hope that others infer their Queer identities based on their appearance or physical presentation. Appearance and the use of symbolic interactionism (Stone and Farberman, 1982; Hutson, 2010) is a growing area of interest in Queer identity research, with some suggesting that appearance and dress are one of the primary mechanisms for ascertaining and displaying such identities. The use of dress or appearance can serve to create a sense of group belonging in Queer communities, resist normative gender expectations, express authentic self-identity, and signal their identity to other people "in the know" (Hutson, 2010; Rothblum, 2014). Furthermore, appearance by Queer individuals is a process of negotiation that is impacted by the environment and the current socio-political context. For example, indicators of Queer identity status have shifted over time from more coded indicators in the "era of the closet" (Seidman, 2002) using colored handkerchiefs (Reilly and Saethre, 2013), fashion brand logos (Clarke and Turner, 2007), to more explicit indicators and gender-Queer fashion (Barry and Martin, 2016) in the post-closet era.

Queer identity can also be marginalized and oppressed within educational environments even without students disclosing their Queer identities. These marginalizing forces occur through the presence of microaggressions (e.g., derogatory statements, invalidations, insults) that creates barriers for students in coming out (Vaccaro, 2012; Vaccaro and Koob, 2018). For instance, 99% of Queer-spectrum youth report hearing the derogatory use of phrases such as "that's so Gay" or "you are so Gay" in school (Kibirige and Tryl, 2013). These forms of oppression help align education with heteronormative experiences and have been shown to result in higher rates of depression, substance abuse, social isolation, and suicide (Herek et al., 2009).

Although we used Queer to refer to students that identify as LGBTQQIP2SA+ we understand that there are several important differences in identity and experiences that are not captured in our data and analysis as a result of combining them into one group. As

such, we recognize the limitations with this approach such that: individuals with the same identity (e.g., Pansexual) have different lived experiences, Queer can consists of both gender and sexual identities, variability within the Queer spectrum for both more visible and hidden identities, and the themes described in our results may be experienced differently by each participant especially considering intersectionality with other forms of oppression. Chase (Pansexual Non-binary) illustrates this when describing a campus organization for Queer students, "I just felt a little left out like there wasn't something for people under the Trans umbrella, and because our experiences can be at times a lot different than other people in the LGBT community." These differences are important and should be studied more extensively, but the commonality is that Queer students in STEM are "managing their identities in learning spaces that are heteronormative, gender normative, and historically heterosexist" (Reynolds and Hanjorgiris, 2000).

Our analysis spotlights how Queer identities are not well represented in STEM learning spaces. This is consistent with findings from Levya et al. (2016) that the technical nature of STEM disciplines is prioritized above social aspects (e.g., technical-social dualism) which often alienates those who do not identify as white, cisgender or heterosexual. This also highlights the need to transform STEM pedagogy to be more "exploratory, fluid, and open" (Voigt, 2020) thus leveraging a Queer theory perspective to re-imagine STEM. We close this manuscript by sharing what participants in this study recommend to support Queer students in higher education at large, STEM disciplines specifically, and in general day to day life. Overall, students advocated for the proper use of pronouns by instructors, highlighting Queer scientists in curricular units, increasing inclusivity by talking about identities in classrooms, supporting identify-affirming organizations (e.g., oSTEM), and increasing representation throughout the field. These recommendations drawn directly from students are not surprising and align closely with prior research studies (Cooper and Brownell, 2016; Hughes, 2018; Kersey and Voigt, 2021). Building on these results, we developed a tiered instructional strategies guide (see Appendix B) that may support instructors in designing learning spaces that are more inclusive and promote more equitable outcomes for Queer-spectrum students.

As we conclude, a fundamental question arises: when will we take action to disrupt the oppressive structures in education and alleviate the trauma experienced by Queer students in STEM? We fear that if we do not take quick and decisive action, the forces that are committing genocide against individuals who are transgender, the murder and brutalization of Queer bodies, and the denigrating rhetoric that silences voices of opposition will rise to levels that have not been seen in recent history. This is a plea to readers and the academic field, that many members of the Queer community are experiencing fear and trauma for our safety, and this cannot be normalized. We close by sharing the inspiring words of two prominent Queer advocates. The first is from Marsha P. Johnson, a leader of the Stonewall uprising, "History is not something you look back at and say it was inevitable. It happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities." The last quote comes from Audre Lorde, "When I dare to be powerful — to use my strength in the service of my vision — then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid," and "we are powerful because we have survived." So, we implore the reader to make impulsive decisions without fear in order to support a vision of a just and inclusive world for Queer individuals.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data contains sensitive information and maybe re-identifiable given the rich nature of the interview data. The raw data from this study may be made available upon request after providing a written rationale and intended use of the data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to MV mkvoigt@clemson.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Clemson University Office of Research Compliance. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MV: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MB: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DC: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SO: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AS: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CW: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

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Interrogating global narratives of trans queerness. Well-being and agency? Or more stories of trans trauma?

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In the international contemporary discourse transgender individuals arguably have an increased presence within public media highlighting the visible diversity that constitutes the LGBTQI2S+ community. However, in response to the challenging of cisgendered normative assumptions there has been an unprecedented swathe of anti-trans measures executed through the frenzied repealing of rights and freedoms within the key arenas of legal, medical, sporting, and educative domains. This paper explores the intersections of pathologizing rhetoric that emplotted anti-trans and transphobic discourses within and across public consciousness. The quotidian presence of these discourses provoked in us a wondering about how evolving conceptual debate is constructing a trans inclusive global imaginary. In this paper we situate trans safety not as a singular concept, but rather a differentially experienced phenomenon that is related to and embedded in questions of bio power and privilege. As such, when we refer to a trans safety imaginary, we are not solely addressing protection from physical violence but also safeguarding against psychological and emotional vulnerability.

KEYWORDS

(anti-)trans(gender), trauma, discourse, (psycho)social, well-being studies involving human subjects

Introduction: (un)well-being and belonging

An intensification of anti-trans sentiment has occurred within recent years, with focal points occurring around gender-affirming care for children, trans women's access to cis women's sport and 'single-sex' spaces (bathrooms, changing rooms, and shelters). A slew of legislation negating the rights, freedoms, and bodily movements of trans individuals have been ratified with sense of displacement focused on specific incidents and events that epitomize feelings of not belonging, and at times of even not existing. At the time of writing this paper, 85 out of 586 bills impacting transgender people in America had passed; 376 bills were active (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023). In Kentucky, *Senate Bill 150* prohibits transgender students from accessing school bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond to their gender identity; obliges schools to *out* students who divulge their gender identity or sexual orientation to their parents; does not require the recognition of the students' pronouns '*that do not conform to a student's biological sex*'; and prohibits health care providers from prescribing puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, or perform '*sterilizing surgery*' or gender-affirming surgery (Higdon, 2023). In Florida, *House Bill 1,069* prevents school employees and students 'to refer to another person using that person's preferred personal titles or pronouns if [they] do not correspond to

that person's sex', stating that: 'a person's sex is an immutable biological trait and that it is false to ascribe to a person a pronoun that does not correspond to such person's sex' ("CS/CS/HB 1069: Education", 2023). Discussion and instruction on gender and sexuality is now prohibited in classrooms from prekindergarten (pre-K) to grade 8. The Bill also states that schools cannot withhold information from parents 'affecting a student's mental, emotional, or physical health or well-being' ("CS/CS/HB 1069: Education", 2023), which may include gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Equally, Florida's *Senate Bill 254* bestows powers to courts to remove children from their parents 'if the child has been subjected to or is threatened with being subjected to sex-reassignment prescriptions or procedures' ("CS/SB 254: Treatments for Sex Reassignment", 2023). The Bill criminalizes access to gender affirming medications and surgeries to youths under 18 years, and makes their prescription a first degree misdemeanor for healthcare providers ("CS/SB 254: Treatments for Sex Reassignment", 2023).

Challenges to trans people's participation in social life are routinely underlined by medical/biological facticity. For example, in March 2023, the World Athletics Council announced that transgender women were precluded from female competitions if they had undergone male puberty (World Athletics, 2023). This is attributable to 'certain aspects of male physiology' (Bianchi, 2017, p. 229)—namely testosterone—being perceived as an unfair advantage leading to the outperformance of cis-women. Of course, biological discourse is already politicized (Zanghellini, 2020) and there is fervid debate on the definition of sex (Butler, 1990, 2004; Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Jackson and Scott, 2001; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Štrkalj and Pather, 2021; Ritz and Greaves, 2022).

Anti-gender/trans campaigners have attempted to homogenize the heterogeneity of gender/trans theory(ies) through caricature. For instance, the frequently deployed terms *gender ideology* and *trans ideology* denote monolithic onto-epistemologies, when there are many diversified conceptualizations. For example, Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity positions gender not as an internal reality but something that is accrued and coalesces into an identity through repetition. Yet, gender performativity runs in opposition to some trans theorists' gender episteme whereby 'the body or the materiality of gender has a kind of stubborn persistence' (Halberstam, 2018, p. 59). Halberstam (2018) critiques that viewing gender within a performative frame infers an illegitimacy of trans genders, ungrounded in the 'real, material and authentic (Halberstam, 2018, p. 120).

This paper pursues an examination of the material effects resultant from the persistent dissemination of trans and gender criticality within the public arena, with particular attention being paid to how transgender individuals face over four times the likelihood of experiencing violent victimization compared to cisgender individuals (Arantes and Vicars, 2023) exploring trauma not only as a psychological phenomenon, but also a sociological occurrence (Thompson and Walsh, 2010). Bettcher (2013) offers a 'multiple meaning view' (p. 234) of transgender onto-epistemology, questioning 'singular fixed meanings of gender terms' (p. 247), i.e., man and woman, utilized by the dominant culture. A core aim of this paper, is to generate critical insight into how materially produced injustices perpetuate cycles of disadvantage for individuals who are trans identified or identifying. We have sought to express Onwuachi-Willig's (2016) argumentation that the circulation of increasingly nocuous anti-trans discourses has mediated a cultural trans trauma, and in doing so deconstruct the intersectionality of power and positionality to critically articulate the totemic power of cisgendered heteronormative expression and oppression(s) relevant to a wider readership seeking an introduction and understanding of the topic.

To craft frameworks for trans and gender diversity requires a venture into uncharted territory where weaving new threads of meaning and significance are yet to happen. Underpinned by a social justice praxis the analysis and discussion components develop a thematic coherence to reimagine the capacities for trans-identified individuals to actively pursue emancipatory dialogue. While *trans* as a signifier falls short in articulating their gendered sense of self, both authors are cognizant that those whose gender identities, variances, and expressions are disparate from their sex assigned at birth are umbrellaed under *trans* (Kuper et al., 2012; Williams, 2014; Halberstam, 2018). Thinking with deconstruction, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) tell us that '[a]ssuming a deconstructive stance is to both use and trouble categories at the same time' (p. 20). Author 2 moves in and across the trans signifier vis-à-vis *strategic essentialism* (Spivak, 1996 [1985]), purposely locating themself under *trans* for the purposes of disrupting the discursive regime of cisnormativity. Author 1 identifies as a gay/queer man and in travelling across lines of difference situates re-centering to reframe and remake meaning and articulate how the ecologies of positionality, power, relationships and affect and experienced and re-negotiated and infused with productive relationality. The conclusion of this paper considers how the wider epistemologies of the gender critical movement have emplotted anti-trans ideology in the media and political domain to produce narratives of (trans) cultural trauma in public discourse.

Articulations of (trans)gender and naming our researcher selves

Said (1975) has noted how culture exerts pressures and how it creates the environment and the community that allows people to feel they belong. Numerous cultures conceive of diverse expressions of gender and gendered presentation beyond the Western ontological assumption of the male/female binary. The Samoan *Fa'afafine* are assigned male at birth but do not inhabit the category of, nor are they recognized as, male (Vasey and Vander Laan, 2021). In India, *hijras* include those who are intersex or transgender, but also not male or female (Diehl et al., 2017). The *muxes* of Mexico are born male but adorn Zapotec garments and feminine accoutrements such as makeup and long hair (Diehl et al., 2017). The Indonesian *waria* are transgender women who may retain their male bodies whilst believing they 'have the heart and soul of a woman' (Toomistu, 2022, p. 73). The indigenous American *two-spirit* refers to persons born with both masculine and feminine spirits, and describes the intersection of gendered, sexual, and spiritual identities (Sheppard and Mayo, 2013).

It is therefore important to distinguish that terms like *gender* and *trans(gender)* are etymologically Western and operate within evolving historical, geographical, social, and cultural contexts. One must be cognizant of the monolingualism in inserting the foreign term(s) within non-English languages (Widerberg, 1998; Butler, 2021a). For instance, Widerberg (1998) reminds us that 'where English is not the native language…there might be one…several or no words for gender' (p. 134), and later: 'it would seem that specific understandings of gender within most cultures cannot be properly translated; they get

made into something else, into the understandings of gender that are implicit in the English language' (p. 134). As terminologies have been formed within the colonial/modern world-system imagery and language there is an erasure of multiple subaltern subjectivities and different articulations of power and resistances. The paradox(es) of colonized identities, race and belonging inevitably confront sense and sensibilities of (un)belonging and place(lessness). Articulating counter narratives that contest a hegemonic narrative involves being reflective and reflexive of one's researcher positionality owing to its emplottment within gendered, sexual, cultural, and racialized relations (Charmaz et al., 2018; Erickson, 2018). And '[a]lthough it is… not possible to name exhaustively all of the conscious and unconscious baggage that the researcher brings [to the research] [here, we offer a] comprehensive statement of [our] … epistemological orientation [and] social positionality' (Scheurich, 1995, p. 249).

The anti-gender movement

It is useful to locate anti-trans rhetoric within the wider epistemologies of the gender critical movement. Opposing what is labelled *gender ideology*, this reactionary group includes the Right, religious conservatives, including the Catholic, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches, and nationalist groups (Loughlin, 2018; Butler, 2021b; Hsu, 2022; Venegas, 2022). The Vatican, for example, is a staunch opponent of gender theory, enshrining the complementarianism of male and female and dimorphic sexuality as essential for the preservation of the traditional family (Loughlin, 2018; Butler, 2021b; Sosa, 2021; Venegas, 2022). In some countries, *gender ideology* is viewed as a cultural import that threatens values and ways of life (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Sosa, 2021; Butler, 2021a): imperiling the family, masculinity, and femininity (Venegas, 2022). Anti-gender campaigners have regarded *gender ideology* as an insidious plot to impose 'deviant and minority values' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018, p. 9) on all, but particularly children.

The anti-gender campaign, which Butler (2021b) labels 'nationalist, transphobic, misogynist, and homophobic', has become a transnational mobilization, with exponents in Germany, Poland, Brazil, Italy, east Asia, Columbia, and Costa Rica (Butler, 2021b). Some have observed the goal of anti-gender movements as stripping basic human rights and democratic projects (Sosa, 2021; Butler, 2021b), for example, 'intimate/sexual citizenship, including LGBT rights, reproductive rights, and sex and gender education' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018, p. 8). This also includes feminism, same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, abortion, non-essentialist discourses on gender and sexuality, and trans rights (Butler, 2021b; Venegas, 2022). Scholarship has traced the proliferation of trans-related matters within the contemporary zeitgeist. From trans women's access to single-sex spaces (Herman, 2013; Schilt and Westbrook, 2015; Barnett et al., 2018; Davis, 2018), trans women's participation in cis women's sports (Sykes, 2006; Schultz, 2011; Love, 2014; Bianchi, 2017; Sailors, 2020), *sex-change regret*/de-transitioning (Temple Newhook et al., 2018; Hildebrand-Chupp, 2020; Slothouber, 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2021; Turban et al., 2021), *trans/gender ideology* allegedly indoctrinating children (Westbrook and Schilt, 2014; Pearce et al., 2020), the related trans *social contagion* and *conversion* of cisgender gay/lesbian youth to heterosexual trans youth (Marchiano, 2017; DeLay et al., 2018; Littman, 2018; Shrier, 2020; Soh, 2020; Ashley, 2020a,b), and the medicalization of children via puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2011; Ashley, 2019; Priest, 2019; Giordano and Holm, 2020; Zanghellini, 2020; Rew et al., 2021). This corpus of research speaks collectively to what has been labelled *the culture war*, *the trans issue*, and *the woke agenda*.

Emplotted anti-trans ideology

Goffman (1963) has highlighted how stigma is an enduring condition that can actively discredit individuals and he coined the phrase 'stigmaphile' to name the space of the stigmatized and 'stigmaphobe' to refer to the world of 'normalcy'. Warner (2000) has noted how:

> The stigmaphile space is where we find a commonality with those who suffer from stigma, and in this alternative realm learn to value the very things the rest of the world despises…The stigmaphobe world is the dominant culture, where conformity is endured through fear of stigma (p. 43).

The quotidian presence of these discourses provoked for us a wondering about bodies that are defined 'by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p. 2), and how such 'bodies are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9). The nexuses between the epistemology of what Savage (2007) calls *the outgroup*—the Other—in the nineteenth century and contemporary anti trans discourse we have italicized within the below quotation:

> [the] "scientific" reason as to why outgroups were inferior and other-than-human (legitimizing their destruction)[*refusing the biological body, 'reality' denialism*], as well as threatening (necessitating it)[*a danger to women, children, society at large*], but also a metaphorical representation, revolving around concepts of hygiene and purity [*hormones and surgical evisceration the body*], which fulfilled identical psychological necessities on a symbolic and populist level…the emergence of the nation-state [*sweeping anti-trans legislature*] allowed perpetrator groups to conceive of themselves as a unitary body [*the anti-trans/gender movement*] within defined geographical limits whose ideal state was one of "racial"[*cisgendered*] homogeneity. The indelible "wrongness" of an outgroup necessitated, in the eyes of perpetrators, the complete removal of that group from a geographically bounded territory [*women's bathrooms/sports, schools*]; a particularly vicious medicalized representation of outgroups as a biological threat not only *legitimized* their disappearance, but directly *motivated* it' (Savage, 2007 pp. 404–405).

Vis-à-vis the ever-tightening political, social, educative, and medical disciplinarity of cisgenderism Foucault's (1988) *biopolitics* is a useful lens through which to consider how the State 'wields its power over living beings' (p. 160) and how the diaspora of anti-trans sentiment becomes material as a dialogical relation, and its affects becomes *sticky* (Ahmed, 2010). By this we mean any ontological assault on the 'metaphysical "transgender" identity itself' (Brown, 2021, p. 188) are socially rewarded and transgressive behaviors are punished' (Green (1998, p. 26). We argue that the rescinding of rights

and the implementation of restrictions removes trans people from the province of intelligibility, rendering them non-human and engenders a socially embedded trauma. Hamburger (2017) defines social traumas as those where 'the whole of the social environment is under threat of persecution or actually experiencing persecution' (p. 80). This is evinced through legislation directly affecting trans persons. Mizock and Lewis (2008) convey that transphobia and violence produce experiences of trauma and associated mental health issues. Risk factors correlated with trans trauma include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and acute stress disorder (Mizock and Lewis, 2008). To palliate this trauma, risky behaviors such as alcohol and substance abuse, and engaging in risky sexual practices might ensue (Hall and DeLaney, 2021). Equally, '[s]uicidal ideation in response to transphobic trauma is a critical concern for transgender individuals' (Mizock and Lewis, 2008, p. 342). Richmond et al. (2012) add that 'having a doctor ask inappropriate or invasive questions during a routine check-up or hearing a talk show host discuss trans issues in pathological or demeaning ways' (p. 47) are trauma-triggering. Hall and DeLaney (2021) add that a '[transgender] individual who has problems using gender-segregated restrooms or who suffers relentless misgendering everywhere they go might avoid leaving the house altogether to minimize physical discomfort and instances of identity abuse' (p.1279). Indeed, Butler (1990) identifies that when '[c]ertain humans are recognized as less than human…that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life' (p. 2).

Psycho-social trauma

Thompson and Walsh (2010) remind us of the significance of acknowledging the 'psychological and sociological dimensions' of trauma (p. 379). Theorizing with Heidegger's (1962) *being-towards-others* as a framework to diverge from the localized and individual experience of trauma Thompson and Walsh (2010) to perceive trauma as a psycho-social phenomenon that embraces an: 'intercorporeality and trans-subjectivity' of bodies (Blackman and Venn, 2010, p. 8). Thinking with this scholarship not only speaks to the affective force that connects people (Helmsing, 2022) in 'how the collective takes shape through the impressions made by bodily others' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 27), but also directs attention to the wider politico-sociocultural relations (Thompson and Walsh, 2010). Onwuachi-Willig (2016) tells us that 'cultural trauma arises because of a public or official sanctioning of the everyday denigration and subjugation of the subordinated group which reinforces a historicity that their rights are not protected and respected in society' (pp. 336–337). Within this matrix, Erikson (1991) positions trauma as a mutual relation between a community through 'situations where trauma becomes so widely shared within an existing collection of people that it dominates its imagery [and] governs the way members relate to one another' (p. 461). It is apparent that trauma is not exogenous in its presentment. These affective states are triggered by 'an assault from outside that break into the space one occupies as a person and damages the interior' (Erikson, 1991, p. 455). These insidious traumas are 'ongoing negative experiences associated with living as a member of an oppressed group' (Szymanski and Balsam, 2011, p. 4). Likes waves protractedly wearing away at the cliff face, these traumas are 'repetitive and enduring' (Richmond et al., 2012, p. 47). Subsuming the atomized traumatogenic experiences of the trans body politic reveals a prevalent phenomenon: a (trans)cultural trauma.

A (trans)cultural trauma lens

Onwuachi-Willig (2016) employed a *cultural trauma narrative* framework to the responses of the black community to the acquittal of two white men for the murder of a 14 year-old African-American youth. Onwuachi-Willig (2016) reasons that there are three criteria which indicate the emergence of cultural trauma:

> First, there must be a longstanding history of the routine harm, a history that essentially leads the subordinated group to expect nothing other than the routine yet cultural trauma—inducing injury. Second…the routine injury must have garnered the type of widespread media attention that makes a large audience, both within and outside the subordinated group, take notice of the routine occurrence…. Third…there must be public discourse about the meaning of the routine harm, a harm that usually occurs in the form of governmental or legal affirmation of the subordinated group's marginal status. (p. 336)

We repurpose this analytic to examine habitual encounters of harassment, violence, and stigmatization, together with deleterious reportage of trans people and issues and the revoking of rights, and how these constitute a cultural trauma. We expatiate upon each of Onwuachi-Willig's (2016) criterions below.

Criterion one: a longstanding history of the routine harm

Trans individuals, as liminal bodies outside of dominant cisgendered norms, have historically experienced sexualization, stigmatization, and psychopathologizing. The controversial phenomenon of autogynephilia—*love of oneself as a woman*—is one example. Psychologist Ray Blanchard coined autogynephilia in the late 1980s to describe how male-to-female transexuals (MtF) are either androphilic (homosexual transsexuals) or non-androphilic (aroused by the thought of becoming women) (Blanchard, 1989, 2005; Bailey and Triea, 2007). According to the autogynephilic thesis, *auto gynephiles* suffer a paraphilia, amongst which include criminal sexual behaviors like pedophilia (Serano, 2020). This diagnosis has offered opponents of trans rights recourse to pathologization in order invalidate trans women's claim to womanhood (see Joyce, 2022). For example, Serano (2020) observes that autogynephilia has been weaponized within trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) to 'insinuate that trans women are merely 'sexually deviant men" (763–764). It may be argued that pathologization, undergirded by mechanisms of power, contributes to *subjection*—the formation of a subject (Butler, 1997).

In order to gain access to gender-affirming care including puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and gender-affirming surgeries, trans individuals must, oxymoronically, accede to the pathologizing diagnosis of gender identity disorder (GID)—now gender dysphoria (Butler, 2004; Mizock and Lewis, 2008; Serano, 2016). Submitting to this psychological condition, as Butler (2004) states, 'imposes a model of coherent gendered life that demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived (p. 5). Contagion rhetoric, reminiscent of that used in anti-gay, lesbian, and bisexual discourse, has been rearticulated towards trans people. Contagion's metaphoric

power resides in its likeness to 'the process of cultural transmission' (Davis, 2002, p. 830), where ideas and attitudes are disseminated amongst the culture. Equally, contagion, goaded by fear, bestows onus to the Other for incipient disease (Pernick, 2002). As put by Hsu (2022), '[t]he language of contagion stokes panic associated with viral epidemics, demanding an urgent governmental and social response' (p. 65). This scaremongering is conveyed through the phenomenon—the 'psychic epidemic' (Ashley, 2020a, p. 783)—of rapid-onset gender dysphoria (ROGD). This diagnosis posits that the deep dissatisfaction one feels about their gender emerges from a social contagion (Slothouber, 2020), with parents reporting online that their children, namely teenage girls, are suddenly, without their presentiment, becoming gender dysphoric (Littman, 2018). Littman's (2018) work has garnered much criticism in terms of methodological rigor and interpretation (Restar, 2020; Bauer et al., 2022). Despite no clinical validation of this apparent subclass of gender dysphoria (World Professional Association for Transgender Health [WPATH], 2018), this diagnosis is given credence by the anti-trans lobby to validate a pervasive contagion amongst adolescent girls (see Shrier, 2020; Joyce, 2022).

In educational domains, LGBTQIA2S+ students experience disproportionately higher instances of bullying, marginalization, depression, anxiety, suicidality, academic difficulties, and truancy compared to heterosexual, cisgendered pupils (Walton, 2005; Almeida et al., 2009; Garron and Logan, 2020; Shevlin and Gill, 2020; Schreuder, 2021). Trans students often feel unsafe within the ambivalent ambience of cisgenderism inscribed in schools (Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). Shevlin and Gill's (2020) discourse analysis on parental attitudes towards the Safe Schools program—an inclusive and anti-bullying program in Australia—discerned *transhysteria* as particularly conspicuous. One participant demonstrated apprehension in their child being perceived as trans through the wearing of pants. Panic and hysteria materialized around the use of toilets, with anxieties around assault engineering the narrative of the innocent child in need of protection and the sexualizing transgender bogeyman (Shevlin and Gill, 2020). Moreover, children and adolescents' transgender identities were met with incredulity, with parents 'positioned as omniscient dictators of identity' (Shevlin and Gill, 2020, p. 906).

Scholarship reveals that trans individuals experience disproportionate incidences of sexual, physical and verbal violence (Koyama, 2003; Butler, 2004; Mizock and Lewis, 2008; Bettcher, 2013; Perry and Dyck, 2014; Halberstam, 2018; Pearce et al., 2020; Stanley, 2021; Suh, 2022); have trouble accessing, and abuse within, the healthcare system (Kidd and Witten, 2007), securing employment and housing (Mizock and Lewis, 2008), and homelessness (Wilkinson, 2014). Priest (2019, p.46) has noted, '[t]ransgender youth are 10 times as likely to attempt suicide when compared to their cisgender peers' and that trans individuals have suffered, and continue to suffer, from a 'constellation of systemic oppressions' (Kidd and Witten, 2007, p. 52).

Criterion two: widespread media attention

Concurrently, essentialist and pathologizing rhetoric from politicians, commentators, authors, and journalists resound and reverberate within and across public consciousness, leading to dis-information and the stoking of fears around what has been termed the *trans debate*. In March 2023, outspoken British gender/trans critic, Kellie-Jay Keen, toured Australia with her *Let Women Speak* tour. The Melbourne leg of the tour drew international attention when neo-Nazis, brandishing the banner DESTROY PAEDO FREAKS attended the event, performing the *Sieg Heil* salute on the steps of Parliament House (Kolovos, 2023).

Waites (2018) asks the question: '[w]hen, should we speak of identity erasure in global queer politics?' (p. 44) as it is not only far right leaning, but voices also conveying antipathy. Splinter factions within the queer community have also voiced opposition to trans rights. In June 2023, a billboard reading 'Let kids be kids' was erected in Tasmania by trans and gender critical group *LGB Tasmania* (Woodall, 2023). This phrase refers to the purported indoctrination and sexualization of children vis-à-vis *trans ideology*. *LGB Alliance Australia* confers that 'biological sex is observed in the womb and/or at birth and is not assigned' and 'current gender ideologies are pseudo-scientific and present a threat to people whose sexual orientation is towards the same sex…we believe that these ideologies are confusing and dangerous to children' (LGB Alliance Australia, n.d.). Additionally, *Binary Australia* 'campaigns for action against the radical gender ideology harming young people, women, and society' (Binary Australia, n.d.), and 'exists to challenge the aggressive agenda to remove sex from our society in the areas of education, health, military, business, politics and the law' (Binary Australia, n.d.).

The anachronistic question *what is a woman?* has become a motto in anti-trans discourse propounded by some politicians in anti-trans discourse, having the metaphysical intent to question the materiality of the female body as 'immobile, stable, coherent, fixed, pre-discursive, natural, and ahistorical' (Moi, 1999, p. 4).

Criterion three: public discourse about the harm

The politico-socio-cultural landscapes within Australia are becoming increasingly fraught with hostile anti-trans rhetoric. In 2020, One Nation MP, Mark Latham, introduced the *Educational Legislation Amendment (Parental Rights) Bill* which sought to contest and de-realize trans students while 'prohibit[ing] the teaching of the ideology of gender fluidity to children in schools' (Education Legislation Amendment (Parental Rights) Bill 2020 (Cth), n.d., p. 1). In 2022, former Liberal party candidate, Katherine Deves, worked with Tasmanian senator, Claire Chandler, in developing what became known as the *Save Women's Sport Bill* (*"Sex Discrimination and other Legislation Amendment (Save Women's Sport) Bill 2022* Cth", n.d.), which sought to amend the Sex Discrimination Act to segregate women's sports on the basis of biological sex.

In the U.S., department store *Target* removed particular Pride month merchandise from shelves following hostile responses from shoppers' and physical confrontations with staff (D'Innocenzio, 2023). Such items include bathers/swimmers that allow pre-operative or trans women who do not desire the removal of their penis a provision to tuck their genitals. Transgender influencer and TikTok personality, Dylan Mulvaney, attracted condemnation and threats of boycott for her partnership with *Bud Light* (Holpuch, 2023), makeup brand *Maybelline* (Picchi, 2023), and for advertising

women's *Nike* apparel (Zilber, 2023). Former U.S. president Donald Trump's 2024 presidential election pitch featured a platitude of proposed restrictive measures against transgender individuals—notably gender affirming care for trans children, including access to puberty blockers and gender affirmation surgeries. Additionally, Trump averred that he will promote schools championing the heteronormative family unit and introduce a Bill that recognizes male and female as the only genders recognized in the U.S. (Seitz-Wald and Yurcaba, 2023). Four years earlier in 2019, the Trump government officially forbad trans people from enlisting in military service (Jackson and Kube, 2019).

In December 2022, Scotland passed their Gender Recognition Reform Bill, which sought to streamline the process for trans people to legally change their gender. The Bill removed the need for the pathologizing diagnosis of gender dysphoria, reduced the age of eligibility for a gender recognition certificate from 18-to 16–17-year-old, and reduced the timeframe where one must live fulltime in their gender from two years to three months (Brooks, 2022). In January 2023, however, the U.K. government vetoed the Bill on the grounds of its discrepancies with the Equality Act 2010, notably around the site of sex as a protected characteristic (Equality Hub, Government Equalities Office, and Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, 2023). In June 2023, England's National Health Service (NHS) rescinded access to puberty blockers for youths questioning their gender, stating: 'NHS England would in future only commission GnRH analogues [puberty suppressing hormones] in the context of a formal research protocol' (NHS England, 2023a), and: 'outside of a research setting, puberty suppressing hormones should not be routinely commissioned for children and adolescents who have gender incongruence/dysphoria (NHS England, 2023b). A myriad of literature supports the routinization and efficacy of puberty suppressing drugs (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2011; Ashley, 2019; Priest, 2019; Giordano and Holm, 2020; Riggs et al., 2020; Rew et al., 2021).

Conclusion—there are few words left with which to speak

The material-discursive effects of numerous anti-trans ideological enterprises resemble what Thompson and Walsh (2010) designate 'an *existential* injury' (p. 378): trauma experienced because of 'an assault on the self' (p. 378) which calls into question a person's place within the fabric of social relations. *Existential injuries* destabilize the moorings of one's existence, 'inflict[ing] a wound to meaning' (Nguyen, 2011, p. 28) and 'severely altering how we see the world and how we make sense of it—in effect, destabilizing or even shattering our frameworks of meaning, our spiritual and existential foundations' (Thompson and Walsh, 2010, p. 379). Whilst trans inclusion and inclusive practices have become a popular international buzzword, a scar is being left on the psyches of trans and gender diverse people who have been and are being traumatized by and in their realities and lived experiences. Research has examined the association between anti-trans sentiment and *exterminationist politics* (Owen, 2022) and Panter (2020) adduces that ideologies of erasure share the objective of attempting to exterminate 'a specific targeted group who violate social, theological, and politically enforced heteronormative expectations' (p. 81). Brown (2021) has described the systematic murders of trans people—particularly trans women—as 'contain[ing] a genocidal logic…demonstrative of the eliminationist intent inherent to both life force atrocities and genocide' (p. 186). This gains salience when considering 2021 had the highest murder rate of transgender people worldwide with 375 deaths (Powell, 2021; Trans respect versus Transphobia Worldwide, 2021), and in 2018, 167 transgender people were killed in Brazil alone (Brown, 2021).

Within this study, the intersections of power that converge on transgender lives shaped by the associated religious, political ideologies and their aligned authoritative bodies (Fyfield, 2022) in turn have impacted legal and legislative frameworks that provide a foundational ground of anti-trans operations (Cumming-Potvin and Martino, 2018). Media discourses which operate within their own intersections of power, influence emergent gender dysphoria and the resultant mental health impacts of inaction (Zaliznyak et al., 2021). In final summary, there is a growing need for allies to advocate for transgender and gender diverse individuals, as reactionary right-wing political forces in the anglosphere are trying and/or succeeding to pass and enforce discriminatory and disciplinary legislation (Vicars and Wolfe, 2023).

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Criminalised, victimised or other? A reflexive engagement with Queer Criminology utilising a relational pedagogical approach

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Queer Criminology is a newfound area of exploration within the discipline of Criminology, which is uniquely positioned to deal with issues regarding crime and victimisation concerning those from the LGBTQIA+ community and gender diverse/minoritized groups. The field of "Queer Criminology" has become vast and expanding, having explored issues of interpersonal, structural and systematic inequality concerning those from the community and beyond. To this end, narratives of victimisation, trauma and injustice have dominated (and limited) understandings of Queer Criminology. Moreover, limited thinking has been attributed within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), which seeks to understand LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups—beyond binarized thinking of victimhood or criminalised. In this article, we offer the perspectives of two higher education professionals teaching Queer Criminology in a "flipped" classroom environment, which positions the learner as expert within the subject matter and utilises a relational pedagogy lens to do so. We discuss the use of our reflexive practice, as both Feminist Decolonial and Queer Criminologists. The article touches upon trauma informed approaches to teaching Queer Criminology. We offer several steps in building a coalition of learning, which can unpick the potential policy, theory, and practical tensions of teaching Queer Criminological Scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Queer Criminology, flipped classroom, LGBTQIA+, SOTL, Higher Education

Introduction

Criminological scholarship has been broadly situated across the domains of Criminal Justice, Social-Legal Studies, Psychology and Sociology related to the study of offenders, victims and the study of Crime. It is important to understand, however, that the Criminological omissions or ignorance of particular social groups is not new (Woods, 2014; Ball, 2016). Indeed, feminist scholarship has pointed towards the dominance of sexism and patriarchy in criminology and, therefore, the neglect of gendered experiences and knowledge production (Smart, 1977; Carlen, 2017). Due to androcentrism and heteronormativity shaping Criminology, the interest in LGBTQIA+ (*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and Asexual*) narratives has been largely absent from the discipline—until recently (Morris, 2018; Rogers and Rogers, 2023). As Woods (2014, p. 16) notes *"the bulk of LGBTQ-inclusive criminological research from the past four decades has focused almost exclusively on bias crime/bullying and intimate partner violence"*. Our intention in this article is not, however, to juxtapose such path breaking scholarship. Instead, it is our intention, to expand the *"Criminological Imagination"* (Young, 2011) and

detail our perspectives as educators within Criminology and the Applied Social Sciences, where we can contribute towards better understanding Queer and LGBTQIA informed Criminological narratives, in coalition with classroom-based learners.

Firstly, we engage with an opening discussion of Queer Criminology. Secondly, the article engages with our positionality as Queer and Intersectional feminist educators in Criminology, and how we reflexively engage with learners in fostering inclusivity and equality in teaching Criminology. Thirdly, we engage with the SOTL practice literature and highlight the relative knowledge gaps in relation to teaching Queer Criminology as a trauma informed and flipped and relational pedagogical practice (Bovill, 2020). Finally, we give our perspectives from a relational pedagogical queer standpoint and how we have worked towards building a coalition of learning within classroom and SOTL practices.

Criminalised, victimised or other? Queering criminology

As briefly mentioned, for several scholars, criminological concerns have focused on "sexual deviance" and patterns of violence that have privileged heteronormativity via epistemological orientations of investigation, which focus predominantly on heterosexuality and heteronormative assumptions (Ball, 2014, 2016; Dwyer et al., 2016; Rogers and Rogers, 2023). Indeed, since the 1970s, criminology, and latterly victimology, has provided a plethora of evidence from distinguished scholars, which have predominantly focused on criminogenic understandings of the family, women-centred experiences of crime and male-pattern violence within the domestic sphere (see Stanley and Wise, 1979; Carlen, 2017; Cook and Walklate, 2019; Rutter and Barr, 2021). Several of these pioneering branches within Criminology have informed policy-based evidence making, police recorded crime statistics, self-disclosed victimisation surveys, international and national crime surveys (Cunneen, 2023). Some of which, have thus far overlooked non-heteronormative patterns of criminality, victimisation, and victimhood (Ball, 2016; Colliver and Silvestri, 2022). Allied scholarship from the branches of feminist and intersectional criminology have attempted to alleviate some of these concerns through centering cross-cutting issues crucial to criminology and the study of victims, which includes inequalities delineated across race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Crenshaw, 2013). More so, Intersectional Criminology has highlighted the propensity for Criminal Justice Systems in the Global North to reproduce the racism and gender-based discrimination within its interactions with criminalised individuals and victims of crime, that Criminology has attempted to explore and eliminate (Potter, 2013).

Nonetheless, the absence and omission of Queer Criminological thinking within a UK Higher Education context remains stark. As such, there remains a lack of focus on the lives of LGBT and Queer people in relation to crime and victimhood (Ball, 2014, 2016). In England and Wales alone, hate related crimes against Gay and Lesbian people in 2021/22 jumped to 25,639 from 14,161 in 2018/19 and almost doubled for the Trans community from 2,253 in 2018/19 when compared to 4,262 reported incidents in 2021/22 (Home Office, 2023). We also acknowledge the under-reporting and (lack of) confidence in criminal justice agencies, in relation to the reporting of crimes against the LGBTQIA+ community and issues with administrative data in explaining the complexities of such reports (see also Zempi et al., 2021). Therefore, we position students as experts in their own learning and life experiences.

Given some of these issues, however, it is essential to recognise and voice LGBTQIA+ victimisation within Criminological knowledge production. Consequently, as Woods (2014, p. 16) acknowledges, '*there is a need for criminologists to investigate the diversity of circumstances under which LGBTQ people experience and commit crime*'. It is our perspective in this article, however, that we need to go much further in understanding how Queer Criminological thinking is produced in the classroom and explored with learners. Through unpacking and cementing their knowledge acquisition regarding Queer issues, in the safety of a classroom environment, we position learners as co-investigators and experts in developing critical pedagogy within the flipped classroom environment that centres Queer knowledge production (Malcom and Lloyd, 2024). To do this, we utilise the lens of relational pedagogy, which builds upon the relationship between learner, peers and lecturer for effective learning. As Bovill (2020, p. 3) points out "(relational pedagogy) puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasises that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students as well as between students and their peers".

A note on reflexivity within queering the classroom: our positionality

Reflexivity is an important tool that is embedded throughout learning and teaching practices (Cain et al., 2022). Reflexivity encourages dialogue that considers beliefs, interests, experiences and values that may impact upon the classroom environment. Willig (2001, p. 1) advises that "personal reflexivity" guides us to be critical about given assumptions and beliefs. The tacit knowledge that comes from being personally reflexive helps to shape our interactions with classroom-based learners. In doing so, this has helped both educators and learners acknowledge how our own subjectivities and lived experiences influence SOTL practices in and outside the classroom environment (Archer, 2009). As such, we both acknowledge and have embedded reflexivity in their approach to teaching Queer Criminological issues. In "Queering" the classroom, we give our reflexive perspectives as Higher Education professionals, who have experienced trauma related to hate crime, homophobia, violence, racism, and xenophobia throughout our time in and outside of academic settings.

For instance, Liam Wrigley (he/him) is a working-class Queer Criminologist and Applied Social Policy academic with an expertise in researching young people's lives. He has worked as Researcher and Lecturer across several institutions in the UK. Liam Wrigley successfully completed his doctoral studies in Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sheffield in 2022 (see Liam Wrigley, 2024). Before entering academia, he worked within several statutory youth support settings and as a volunteer and researcher, including a LGBTQIA+ organisation that has

supported young people and their families (including families of choice) in navigating homelessness, homophobia, transphobia and hate crime. Liam Wrigley is a survivor of youth violence and has experienced disablist micro-aggressions, ableism, institutional homophobia, victim-blaming, and negative assumptions associated with the intersections of his working-class identity. He has experiences of police-initiated encounters, as a victim of violent crime and as a professional working in Higher Education.

On another note, Evangelia Koumentaki (she/her) is an early-career Critical Criminologist with expertise in indigenous/customary forms of justice and punishment. After working in the private sector and offering her support to young victims, Evangelia Koumentaki left her country to pursue her dream of obtaining postgraduate studies in Criminology. She successfully completed her doctoral studies in Criminology at the University of Essex in 2022. Prior to her doctoral studies, Evangelia Koumentaki coordinated research projects on Restorative Justice and other topics related to criminology. Evangelia Koumentaki experienced racism during the early years of her life and throughout her educational, personal, and professional life due to her cultural heritage. Sexism, discrimination, and harassment in her life also have occurred as a "courtesy" of her gender. Having experienced such forms of hate, Evangelia Koumentaki is committed to fighting any form of discrimination and oppression, aiming for inclusiveness, and contributing to social justice through her teaching and research.

Background: teaching queer criminology as a flipped classroom SOTL practice

During academic year 2022–23, Liam Wrigley and Evangelia Koumentaki led a series of interactive lectures to MA level degree students within a medium sized UK Higher Education Institution. Both Liam Wrigley and Evangelia Koumentaki were responsible for several undergraduate and postgraduate teaching provisions within Criminology. Both authors have since taught Queer Criminology several times since, in a number of different institutions. Here, we reflect on our working relationship, where we explored the postgraduate taught and undergraduate provision and identified several gaps in areas of Criminological scholarship that had not been delivered within such programmes. With students being shortly introduced to feminist criminological scholarship in the early months of their studies, further teaching and familiarisation with gender related subjects were substantially reduced. We were both able to identify that some modules and teaching opportunities lacked an understanding of Queer, Intersectional, and wider Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion issues.

As Feminist and Queer Critical Criminologists, we both operated a deep ethic of care towards our colleagues and students across all our working relationships (see also Stanley and Wise, 1979). As reflexive practitioners, we drafted several learning and teaching resources that were attuned to our learners' voices/needs and recognised professional and interdisciplinary boundaries between learner, peer group and teaching staff as a form of good relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020). It is our perspective throughout that our professional relationships are key to unpacking and understanding discursive issues of queerness, trauma and feelings of difference in the safe space of a classroom learning environment. However, we quickly come to understand that we should not impose a framework of learning upon students, and instead, should be able to learn in a de-hierarchical environment (Cornelius-White and Harbaugh, 2009). Our perspective is that the student should be experts of their own lived experiences that enrich teaching and learning opportunities, therefore we decided to "flip" the classroom and support students in developing their own critical disciplinary literacy around understandings of Queer Criminology (see also Ahearne, 2022).

We understand that students may not have conscious experiences with the LGBTQIA+ community or may possess unconscious biases of such. We therefore asked that students build a series of rules of engagement that promotes safety, respect, understanding and inclusion when engaging with each other's perspectives. Through building a relational pedagogical approach throughout the academic year, we quickly came to know students who had experienced trauma because of LGBTQIA+ victimisation. In part, this was achieved through both Liam Wrigley and Evangelia Koumentaki being open about our experiences of victimisation and encouraging dialogue around our interpersonal knowledge of such within the professional boundaries of the virtual and physical classroom.

It is important to note that there is no prior demographic data within student systems that captures protected characteristics such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans or Queer identity in England and Wales. However, notable exceptions include the possibility of disclosure if a student chooses to be in learner inclusion plans, whereby students are known to student services (Cain et al., 2022). This raises further complexities as sexuality and gender identity are sometimes disaggregated from student demographic profiles that increases the possibility of Higher Education professionals working within assumptions and bias. For instance, a student disclosing being a victim of a Homophobic or Transphobic hate crime (see also Rogers and Rogers, 2023)—this does not give an accurate understanding of a student's LGBTQIA+ identity or provide Higher Education professionals prior knowledge of students who have experienced trauma, victimhood or criminality related to gendered identity or sexuality. In many ways, this could promote the potential for bias or assumption within professional practice. To also note, "*sexual orientation*" and discrimination in relation to one's "*sex*" is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act (2010) Section 12, which we understand requires a more nuanced analysis which is beyond the scope of this article. Both authors reflect upon flipped classroom activities in a way which makes use of advanced content warnings and reminders to engage with care, reflection and understanding of each student's needs. We also worked in a way which did not assume identity or protected characteristics and upheld our position as responsible and ethical educators. We build upon trauma informed practices and good relational practices between learner groups.

Flipping the classroom: lessons from queer relational pedagogy in action

Importantly, Queer criminology has arrived to counteract heteronormative modes of knowledge production in criminological

thinking and, consequently, to open a window of inclusivity for queering victim and offender dichotomies (see Ahmed, 2006; Rogers and Rogers, 2023). We, however, argue that such different voices and experiences, nonetheless, are hard to understand when Higher Education institutions do not have an appropriate grounding in working with Queer related issues, or a solid procedural understanding of the complex intersectional inequalities that LGBTQIA+ learners face. As maintained throughout this perspective article, it is our reflection that learning is an evolving process and has been positioned best when we are relatable to learners and colleagues and can foster inclusivity in our working relationships. Here, we reflect on our perspectives as Higher Education professionals teaching Queer Criminological issues and steps taken to create a relational pedagogical approach.

Active understanding of institutional dynamics in relation to queer criminology

One step towards challenging heteronormative processes within Criminology programmes is to actively support LGBTQIA+ students in their progression through visible ally ship. We note that throughout our careers, we have actively championed the voices of LGBTQIA+ students alongside other key intersectional dimensions of difference, such as gender and ethnicity/race. We understand that in more cases than often, undergraduate programmes recruit high numbers of White cisgender female students, with such accomplishments actively celebrated throughout our careers inter alia institutional widening participation agendas (see also Trebilcock and Griffiths, 2022). As a cisgender de-colonial feminist scholar, Evangelia Koumentaki has critically questioned such administrative endorsements by pointing out that although the institution has promoted inclusive strategies to welcome female students, queer identities are nonetheless silent within recruitment strategies and final numbers (Colliver, 2021). Evangelia Koumentaki argues that if we aim for equality, diversity, and inclusion, then we should start counting the numbers of newcomers differently and resist working in silos with colleagues across the institution. Collectively, we position that greater understanding of LGBTQIA+ students' presence and involvement in curriculum design should be acknowledged before entering our classes, to establish an inclusive environment (Henry et al., 2023). By doing this, we do not only promote active inclusive education but more importantly promote democratisation of recruitment practices that consequently will contribute to democratic knowledge processes.

Working with and unpacking trauma, criminalization, and victimisation from a place of safety

In all our teaching and learning commitments, we have both embedded safety as a paramount approach in tackling Criminological subject issues that come with unpacking trauma. As Higher Education professionals teaching a degree programme, where learners often come to "make sense" of their lived experiences of criminalization and victimisation—Queer Criminology is no different (cf. Dwyer et al., 2016). As this perspectives article has positioned, students come across learning information whereby LGBTQIA+ victims (and perpetrators) voices have been marginalised from mainstream Criminological thinking, which in some cases silences issues related to homophobic and transphobic inequalities within the Criminal Justice system (cf. Ball, 2016). In the dynamics of the classroom environment, we both understand that a large majority of students have engaged with Queer Criminology from a point of care and awareness of the inequalities and othering of the LGBTQIA+ community (Glazzard and Vicars, 2022). In unpacking traumatic experiences, criminalization and victimisation, we position that the classroom should be a safe environment to build relational pedagogical practices that are embedded in promoting trust and meaningful engagement with the learners. By democratising the learning resources through "flipping" the learning content, this gave students the opportunity to share their experiences and build coalitions with other learners in deciphering Queer issues whilst making sense of the subject matter from both a relational and academic perspective.

Democratising knowledge production and student voice

Finally, we position that knowledge production should be democratised in learning about issues related to Queer Criminology. Democratisation was key in creating a Queer relational pedagogy in the classroom environment. In our teaching we decided to "flip" the classroom environment by giving choice to students regarding the creation of reading lists and democratisation of academic texts, as a way of building relationships with learners. Liam Wrigley notes how he has experienced several difficulties in sourcing appropriate reading list materials, in which Queer Criminological scholarship has not been appropriately financially supported by institutions. Evangelia Koumentaki, on several occasions had to conduct specific orders to institutions to boost reading options on Queer criminology for students who were conducting dissertation projects on related subjects. Therefore, through flipping the learning resources, we allowed students to appropriately express themselves vis-à-vis the reading list creation—such as utilising alternative formats and creative methods, including podcasts, visual resources (such as zines) and vlogs of Queer scholarship. This approach allowed for newer and less established voices to be platformed. We collectively understand that student voice should be promoted by respecting trauma narratives and lived experiences (see also Trebilcock and Weston, 2019; Ahearne, 2021). We also note that the assessment content should be related to Queer offenders and victims by including assessment questions or case studies of Queer criminology relevance. Nonetheless, Queer Criminological thinking should go beyond these binaries and help students to decipher Queer epistemologies, methodologies, and methods to build appropriate disciplinary literacy. As Higher Education professionals, we have

made learning materials openly available, instead of gatekeeping the release of information each week via a Virtual Learning Environment (see also Ahearne, 2022). Indeed, democratising knowledge production is not a matter of simply expanding the curriculum but, instead, including queer research and case studies as foundational knowledge early on in an undergraduate degree programme. Going forward, we have decided to introduce Queer subject matters much earlier on in the learning process, through embedding Queer Criminology as first year undergraduate studies; rather than positioning Queer Criminology as a specialist area of interest, or "othering" the subject (Ball, 2016; Vicars, 2020).

Concluding point

To summarize, both authors have given their perspective points on teaching Queer criminology as a relational pedagogical practice. We have touched upon issues related to trauma, victimisation and criminalization and attempted to recognise and address inequities in learning related to the LGBTQIA+ community in relation to criminology. By utilising a relational pedagogical approach, this has enabled both Liam Wrigley and Evangelia Koumentaki to be reflexive of our praxis as decolonial and queer educators teaching Queer related subject matters. It is important, however, to acknowledge that it is beyond the scope of this perspective article to discuss student-led narratives in understanding the impact of Queer Criminological teaching. We have, nonetheless, harnessed our knowledge of several institutions and the strengths of relational approaches and flipped classroom practices within our teaching. Through providing a pedagogical reflection, we have contributed towards expanding the "Criminological Imagination" towards a Queer centred discipline, which democratically understands student voice and works within safe parameters in unpacking Queer trauma narratives.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

LW: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. EK: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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"Dressed like boys, hair trimmed, a *nalla kutti* otherwise": construction of queer suicide in Indian online news media

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Suicide is a significant newsworthy event, and the media often cover cases involving queer individuals. However, there is a notable lack of research on the quality of reporting of queer suicide cases within the Indian context. This article aims to address the existing gap in Indian online news media by investigating the portrayal of queer suicide via content analysis. Content analysis involves qualitatively condensing and interpreting data to extract key consistencies and meanings from a plethora of qualitative material. The newspapers considered span from 2005 to 2022, with data collection conducted in 2023. The author alone identified news articles on queer suicide and conducted the subsequent content analysis. The study reveals that reporting on queer suicide tends to divide queer couples into the gender binary and describes what it deems to be careless sexual conduct driven by obsessive queer love, which, in turn, is blamed for the suicide. Moreover, these reports often do the following: feature families who refuse to accept their children's identities, adopt dread-filled tones, and cite experts who provide incorrect information while engaging in victim blaming. As a result, the quality of queer suicide reporting in Indian newspapers is deemed substandard and offensive. To address this issue, the study proposes the need for training and curriculum updates in journalistic courses. This way, reporters can develop the skills necessary to sensitively and respectfully report on queer individuals in general and on queer suicide in particular.

KEYWORDS

mass media, news reporting, LGBTQ+, journalist, sexuality, suicide

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of suicide being perceived as "newsworthy" (Armstrong et al., 2020, p. 1; Kar et al., 2021, p. 2) combined with the increasing media presence of queer[1] sexuality (Wishbox Studio, 2023)—a topic that has consistently captured readers' attention and imagination while sparking debates due to its taboo nature (Thomson, 2022)—has led media outlets to utilise queer suicide reporting to their advantage. Ghosh (2022, p. 3) asserts that queer suicide not only has the potential to generate news but also sustains viewer interest (Johns et al., 2019, 2020).

1 In this context, the umbrella term "queer" refers to a sexual and gender minority individual. This categorisation is necessary due to unclear self-identity or incorrect identification mentioned in the reports of deceased individuals.

In general, suicide poses a significant challenge to public health (Beam et al., 2018, p. 15). In the context of India, studying suicide is imperative given the country's alarming suicide rates, estimated to range between 18 and 21 deaths per 100,000 population, surpassing the global average of 11 deaths per 100,000 population (World Health Organization, 2014; India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Suicide Collaborators, 2018). This translates into an estimated 230,000–250,000 suicide-related deaths annually (Armstrong et al., 2020, p. 1). Of particular concern is the issue of queer suicide, as it is well-established that younger non-heterosexual individuals face an elevated risk of suicidal behaviour—a concern recognised for approximately two decades (Cover, 2012b, p. 1,173). Studies indicate that young individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ are over four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Johns et al., 2019, 2020).

This study differs from earlier ones conducted in India by excluding psychological and sociological perspectives and instead incorporating journalistic discourse, which significantly contributes to the understanding of psychological and sociological issues. Journalists, as rhetoricians, practice "people production or meaning work to define and narrate characters or in particular ways for particular goals" (Pullen, 2024, p. 89). Thus, what and how they choose to cover matters (Lonsdale, 2021, p. 135). Appropriate suicide reporting is essential because it allows journalists to help people understand underlying social issues, prevent further tragedies, and raise awareness of mental wellness in the community (Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma, 2020, p. 34). Conversely, inappropriate reporting might lead to adverse effects, exemplified by the phenomenon of copycat suicide.[2]

While media portrayals of queer suicide often commodify queer identities to attract more readers and viewers, they remain insightful for researchers (Cover, 2012a, p. 20). Therefore, this research aims to analyse media content related to queer suicide. To achieve this goal, the research focuses on internet news reports of queer suicides. In the internet era, online news reports have become highly accessible, with statistical evidence suggesting that online suicide stories attract many views (Armstrong et al., 2020, p. 14) and can become viral through easy dissemination on social media and other internet channels (Kar et al., 2022c, p. 2). Given India's expanding internet access and the generation shift towards digital news consumption (Aneez et al., 2019), studying online news media reports becomes imperative.

Understanding the public's perception of LGBTQ+ suicide is essential (Wolff et al., 2014, p. 4). News reports and popular cultural products such as cinema and books are valuable mediums to achieve this aim. This research undertakes a content analysis of online news media reports in India, in both English and Hindi, regarding incidents of queer suicide. The study covers the period from 2005 (which marks the inception of online newspaper publications) to 2022 (the time of this research).

This paper employs queer theory, which provides a critical framework to analyse the operations by which power solidifies and validates particular forms and representations of sexuality and gender. It also examines how others are labelled as abnormal (Ruhsam, 2017). Among the most prominent scholars in this area are Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Teresa de Lauretis. Queer theory is concerned with the complicated connections that influence how gender and sexual identity are understood and expressed within politics, culture, law, and history. It also examines the efforts of dominant forces to unify gender and sexual identities, and how these have affected minority identities. Queer theory focuses on the ways in which gender and sexuality as social constructions regulate gender and sexual identities, thus contributing to public discourses about sexual orientation and gender identity.

With queer theory as its basis, this paper examines the forms of marginalisation and delegitimisation that people with non-heterosexual sexualities and gender identities differing from binary norms experience through news reports' narratives. Suicide is often attributed to the perceived illegitimacy of their sexual expressions or non-conforming gender identities. These narratives portray queer individuals negatively, depicting them as senseless and immoral, ostensibly leading themselves towards self-destruction through careless and uninhibited sexual behaviour. Such a narrative seeks to serve as a guide for readers, instructing them on what behaviours to avoid in order to prevent a life of misery. It suggests that normativity is the path to happiness and peace. This situation underscores the prevalence of the heterosexist narrative that journalists perpetuate. The narrative is accompanied by an implicit threat, i.e., that deviating from it might result in agony or, worse, the end of one's life.

The primary focus of this paper lies in the analysis of news reports, a fundamental component of the cultural landscape, to explore the prevailing narratives through which suicide reports portray the deaths of queer individuals in India. Through this exploration, the research sheds light on the efforts that institutions, specifically media houses, make in their news reports to either normalise or stigmatise gender and sexual identities and desires. Additionally, this paper offers insight into the mechanisms through which these identities are regulated, involving various parties such as journalists responsible for crafting the news reports as well as the parents, coworkers, relatives, neighbours, teachers, and classmates of queer individuals, who are quoted in these reports.

The implications of this research extend to the media industry, social workers, mental health practitioners, and researchers involved in framing suicide prevention guidelines and public policies as well as future funding decisions. Furthermore, this study is essential for advancing research on queer mental health and suicide, particularly in India and other parts of the world. The prominent themes emerging from this research might help society comprehend how the news media either support or counter queerphobia and heterosexism—the root causes of queer social issues.

2 Legal and societal perspectives on queer identities in India and their portrayal in Indian media

The roots of queer identities and sexuality in India can be traced back to ancient times, as evidenced by historical writings and oral traditions dating back over 2,000 years (Pattanaik, 2015; Vanita and Kidwai, 2016). Notably, the Hijra community, encompassing transgender, intersex, and/or eunuch individuals, played significant roles in Hindu religious texts and during the Mughal era (Reddy, 2006).

2 Copycat suicide involves individuals imitating suicidal behaviour after learning about another person's suicide.

In a landmark decision in 2014, the Supreme Court officially recognised Hijras as the third gender (CLPR, 2018). Other indigenous sexual identities such as Kothi (sexually receptive and relatively feminine) and Panthi (the masculine insertive partners of hijra and kothi) further enrich the diverse landscape of sexuality in India (Stief, 2017). Unlike Western cultures, in which sexual identities often fit into distinct categories (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual), India embraces fluidity, with sexual roles and behaviours transcending conventional labels (Khan, 2001; Patel et al., 2012).

The colonial imposition of Section 377 in 1861 criminalised same-sex love, marking a shift towards intolerance in India (Vanita, 2013). However, the repeal of Section 377 in 2018 was a significant step towards the recognition of queer rights, allowing consensual same-sex acts in private (Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, 2018). Yet, the recent refusal to grant marriage rights to same-sex couples (Ellis-Petersen, 2023) underscores ongoing challenges faced by the queer community and highlights the complex journey from historical acceptance to colonial criminalisation and post-independence legal advancements.

The impact of anti-queer legislation on societal attitudes has been documented in various studies. For instance, Rao et al. (2020) underscored how laws such as Section 377 perpetuated social and legal discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, exacerbating the stigma they endured. Conversely, the decriminalisation of Section 377 marked a significant milestone in acknowledging and embracing homosexual individuals within Indian society (Singpho, 2022), a sentiment echoed by Kaur and Stephen (2019) who noted its positive effects on the homosexual community.

Nevertheless, the residual cultural and psychological effects of Section 377 persist post-decriminalisation, continuing to impact India's LGBTQ+ community negatively (Rao et al., 2020). Maji et al. (2024) found that negative attitudes towards homosexuality prevail among engineering students, highlighting persistent societal biases. Similarly, Sorathiya et al. (2023) revealed a significant proportion of medical graduate students harbouring negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals despite overall positive trends.

Jamwal (2023) observed contrasting dynamics between urban and rural areas regarding LGBTQ+ acceptance. Urban centres have witnessed a surge in LGBTQ+ individuals openly expressing their identities, accompanied by a growing acceptance, whereas rural areas often maintain secrecy due to entrenched traditional norms. Nonetheless, Jamwal noted a gradual shift in societal attitudes, particularly among the younger demographic, attributed to factors such as decriminalisation, increased media representation, advocacy efforts, and pride events (Dhabhar and Deshmukh, 2021; Jamwal, 2023).

Concerning media representation, popular culture serves as a powerful tool in shaping societal norms and ideologies (Goel, 2021). Media messages profoundly influence collective mindsets, making accurate and inclusive portrayals of queer identities crucial (Kaur, 2018). Given most people's reliance on media platforms for information and entertainment, media representation holds significant sway (Kanwar and Singh, 2021). In the context of queer identities, media representation not only aids in the development of gender identity, self-perception, and societal acceptance, but also influences public perceptions of the queer community (Randev, 2022).

The research highlights a significant disparity in representation statistics between Indian media and Western media, as noted by Martel (2020). This limited portrayal also reveals concerning trends, as mass media often depict queer individuals in stereotypical ways, thereby impacting their lived experiences (Phogat and Verma, 2022). While Indian cinema has transitioned from caricatured depictions to more nuanced portrayals of queer characters, commercial success remains elusive, and entrenched gender biases persist in popular culture (Manukriti and Ajay, 2020; Joy et al., 2023). Efforts to bring authentic representation to mainstream discourse through cinema have been highlighted (Kaur, 2017).

Positive representations of queer characters in advertisements help empower the queer community and foster inclusivity (Chauhan and Shukla, 2016). Moreover, research indicates a shift in Indian media coverage of LGBTQ issues from a diplomatic stance to a proactive and reformist one, with most stories adopting an equality stance and a positive attitude (Parthasarathi and Kumari, 2019). In the contemporary landscape, both traditional and new media must play a bigger role in educating the public about important queer issues by shedding light on marginalised queer identities (Randev, 2022). Further research beyond cinema is advocated to gain comprehensive insights into media representations of the queer community.

3 Literature review

Effective and sensitive reporting on suicide is of paramount importance, as it has the potential to influence the prevalence of suicide. Stack (2003) discovered a direct correlation between increased media coverage of suicide and a rise in suicide rates. This underscores the critical need for responsible and sensitive suicide reporting. Several international studies have been conducted to identify issues and errors in reporting that can inform responsible reporting practices (Blood et al., 2007; McTernan et al., 2018; Fong, 2021; Sørensen et al., 2021; Arafat et al., 2022). These studies have shed light on the generally poor quality of suicide news reporting. Notably, they indicate that journalists in countries like the US, Australia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Ireland, and Malaysia frequently fail to adhere to established reporting guidelines aimed at minimising potential harm resulting from irresponsible coverage of suicide (Blood et al., 2007; McTernan et al., 2018; Fong, 2021; Sørensen et al., 2021; Arafat et al., 2022).

Turning away now from general population suicide reporting to the LGBTQ+ population on an international scale, it becomes evident that media play a pivotal role in either garnering support for or perpetuating discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. A study conducted in Singapore reveals that language has been strategically employed to influence national and regional discussions concerning LGBTQ+ populations (Phillips, 2021). This underscores the importance of responsible reporting practices in safeguarding the rights and acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities, as well as reducing the risk of suicide among LGBTQ+ individuals resulting from irresponsible media coverage. However, the reality is quite different. Research in the US found that newspaper articles addressing issues such as gay teen suicide and gay bullying often lack explicit references to key factors like homophobia, heterosexism, and practical strategies for addressing anti-gay bullying (Greene, 2013).

Similarly, another study highlighted the fact that news reporting on LGBT youth suicide frequently fails to address the connections between heteronormativity, mental health, depression, and despair (Cover, 2012b). Paceley and Flynn's (2012) research reveals an

overrepresentation of white males in reports on queer youth bullying, while another study found that news reporting on transgender suicides in UK newspapers often does not adhere to responsible reporting standards (Bolzern et al., 2019).

Numerous studies have assessed the quality of suicide reporting in Indian newspapers in English and other regional languages. Krishnamurthy et al. (2022, p. 1) argue that the media tends to "scapegoat, simplify, speculate, and sensationalise suicide-related news" rather than guide people to seek help. Other research has found that news reporting on suicide is often brief, simplistic, and graphic, making it highly dangerous for readers (Armstrong et al., 2018, p. 6). Additional studies have highlighted this irresponsible and subpar quality of reporting (Jain and Kumar, 2016, p. 1; Menon et al., 2022b, p. 4).

Heightening the concern, multiple studies have shown that suicide reporting lacks content that sensitises and educates readers about the issue (Jain and Kumar, 2016; Menon et al., 2020, 2021, 2022a; Kar et al., 2022a,b). Reports often omit critical information such as helpline numbers, the availability of mental health support during crises (Chandra et al., 2014, p. 693; Menon et al., 2022b, p. 3), professional opinions, suicide warning signs (Kar et al., 2022b, p. 4), and suicide-related statistics (Menon et al., 2020, 2022b). In response to such insensitive and careless reporting, researchers advocate for educating and training media professionals to engage in responsible suicide reporting (Jain and Kumar, 2016; Krishnamurthy et al., 2022).

Studies have also revealed that suicide reporting often fails to adhere to WHO suicide report guidelines or Press Council of India (PCI)-prescribed guidelines (Chandra et al., 2014; Menon et al., 2020, 2021; Kar et al., 2022a). Moreover, there is a lack of systems in place to ensure strict compliance with the framed guidelines (Arafat et al., 2020, p. 21). Comparative studies have consistently shown that English reporting on suicide is of higher quality compared to its regional counterparts (Jain and Kumar, 2016; Ganesh et al., 2020; Kar et al., 2021; Menon et al., 2021, 2022b; Raj et al., 2022).

In discussing studies on queer suicide reporting in India, Ghosh (2022, p. 2) notes that, historically, queer suicide in the Indian media received less attention than it does now. Mainstream media largely ignored the matter until it began making front-page news. She objects to the prevailing media trend of sensationalising the existence of a lesbian individual, portraying such a person as a solitary spectacle with no recognition of the broader social and personal circumstances shaping her life. Ejaz and Moscowitz (2020, p. 7), while analysing news stories covering the death, under mysterious circumstances, of a gay university professor named Ramchandra Siras, found that the case essentialised gay identity, signified civil rights and citizenship, complicated sexuality and consent, problematised the public/private boundaries of sexuality, and negotiated competing claims of morality. Despite this growing media interest, only limited scholarly work has analysed the portrayal of queer suicide in the media (Kar et al., 2021).

This literature review suggests that the quality of reporting on suicide in the general population is poor and often fails to adhere to the guidelines set forth by the World Health Organization (WHO). However, from this, it is difficult to extrapolate the quality of LGBTQ+ suicide reporting, especially considering that journalists covering sexual and gender minorities are expected to possess a higher degree of sensitivity and knowledge about the community (Geertsema-Sligh et al., 2020) compared to those reporting on suicide in the general population.

As mentioned earlier, studies that focus specifically on queer suicide in the Indian context are scarce and have limited scope. In contrast, this research encompasses all suicide incidents reported from 2005 to 2022, spanning all queer identities. This paper identifies and queers the dominant frames that emerge from news reports of suicides. It asserts that the quality of queer suicide reporting is often inadequate, revealing a lack of knowledge among journalists, which might further marginalise the queer community.

4 Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis to identify prominent framing devices used in reporting on queer suicide in both English and Hindi online news stories. Qualitative content analysis, as defined by Patton, involves "qualitative data reduction and sense-making efforts" to distil core consistencies and meanings from a volume of qualitative material (Patton, 2002, p. 453). This method goes beyond word counting or objective content extraction to examine the meanings, themes, and patterns that might be explicit or hidden within a given text. It enables researchers to understand social reality subjectively yet scientifically (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2024). Previous research works have conducted quantitative content analysis on news reports (Al-Naggar and Al-Jashamy, 2011; Zafri et al., 2021; Oosthuizen, 2022). The present research maintains a similar methodology.

The process followed for the content analysis is outlined as follows:

4.1 Collecting suicide news reports

The primary data source for this content analysis comprises Hindi and English web news reports identified from a comprehensive list available on Wikipedia (Wikipedia Contributors, 2023).

In identifying English news reports on queer suicide cases, the following search terms were employed: "same-sex suicide," "LGBT suicide," "LGBTQI suicide," "LGBTQIA suicide," "LGBTQ+ suicide," "gay suicide," "homosexual suicide," "lesbian suicide," "transgender suicide," "bisexual suicide," "queer suicide," "intersex suicide," "hijra suicide," "kinnar suicide," "third gender suicide," "asexual suicide," and "eunuchs suicide."

To locate Hindi news reports on queer suicide cases, the following Hindi search terms were combined with widely used Hindi synonyms for suicide: 'जान देदी' [committed suicide], 'खुदकुशी' [suicide], and 'आत्महत्या' [suicide]. The specific terms used for the queer community in Hindi were: 'बाईसेक्सुअल' [bisexual], 'गे' [gay], 'किन्नर' [transgender], 'समलैंगिक' [gay], 'ट्रांसजेंडर' [transgender], 'उभयलिंगी' [bisexual], 'थर्ड जेंडर' [third gender], 'तृतीयपंथी' [third gender], 'इंटरसेक्स' [intersex], 'हिजड़ा'[transgender], 'एलजीबीटी' [LGBT], 'एलजीबीटीक्यू' [LGBTQ], 'एलजीबीटीक्यूआई' [LGBTQI], and 'एलजीबीटीक्यूआईए' [LGBTQIA]. In this manner, 145 queer suicide news reports published between 2005 to 2022 were found.

4.2 Identifying data

The collected suicide news reports were carefully studied. Problematic statements were identified, coded, and placed in a separate column in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

TABLE 1 Themes, sub-themes, sub-sub-themes, and codes used in the content analysis.

Theme	Sub-theme	Sub-sub-themes	Codes
1. Perceiving queer couples within the framework of gender binary paradigms	1.1 Appearance		Wears, behaves like, is like, appears, dressed as
	1.2 Live like husband and wife		Live like husband and wife, similar to/consider husband and wife, father, husband, wife, bride, groom
2. Queer people's uninhibited and predatory sexual conduct	2.1 Queer people's uninhibited sexual conduct	2.1.1 Onlookers' accounts	Engrossed in each other, intimate moments, objectionable conditions, dirty activities, misdeeds, shame, deteriorating atmosphere, public display of affection
		2.1.2 Journalistic portrayals and interest in the sexual lives of queer individuals	Spent time together, had fun, growing closeness, sexual relationship, sexual desire, love affair
	2.2 Queer people's sexually predatory behaviour		Physical overtures, inappropriate advances
3. Abhorrent and frenzied queer love			Illicit, unlawful, illegal, immoral, infamy
4. Queer relationships: an alleged cause of suicide			Due to/following/resulting from a homosexual/lesbian relationship
5. Family's rejection of the deceased's queer identity	5.1 Narrative of a close friendship		Friends, close friendship, just good friends
	5.2 Converted to queer narrative		Forced or brainwashed into becoming queer
	5.3 Straight ally narrative		Ally involved in activities of rehabilitation and improvement of the queer community
	5.4 The deceased was not a queer person		Parents' outright rejection of the queer identities of their children
6. Deficiencies in suicide prevention interventions	6.1 Wrong information		Sweeping conclusions, faulty analogies, use of incorrect terms or descriptions
	6.2 The fault of the deceased		Victim blaming
7. Pessimistic and dreading tone			Deprived, depression, hate, searing indictment, rampant, dangerous, unsympathetic environment, everyday bullying, tragic pattern, fringes

4.3 Developing themes, sub-themes, and sub-sub-themes

After a comprehensive examination of the problematic statement, themes, sub-themes, and sub-sub-themes under which the data could be classified were inductively developed, as shown in Table 1.

4.4 Analysing themes

Through the lens of queer theory, the emerged themes, sub-themes, and sub-sub-themes were analysed. Use of this theory also helps shed light on the reason for the poor portrayal of queer people, which is due mainly to the fact that queer people defy the binary categories of gender and sexuality and the set norms of heteronormativity.

4.5 Drawing conclusion

In this step, the categorised news report statements were analysed to draw conclusions and provide explanations for the observed instances of poor reporting in queer suicide news reports.

5 Discussion

5.1 Perceiving queer couples within the framework of gender binary paradigms

The gender binary is regulated by the dominant force of heterosexuality, which sees the couple and relationship in a masculine and feminine binary (Butler, 2011). The same is reflected in a newspaper when the reports make queer couples intelligible to the dominant heterosexual readership and themselves by assigning male and female roles, relying on appearance, clothing, behaviour, and other stereotypical readings of queer individuals. In these reports, the media tends to suggest that queer couples resemble opposite-sex couples in behaviour and/or appearance, even when such details are irrelevant to the suicide case.

5.1.1 Appearance

Examples of gender binaries created through clothing include:

1 "Mrs. Mehta wearing a male pullover and pants, and Mrs. Pant clad in a sari" (India Today, 2015).
2 "Bobby used to dress and behave like a man, whereas Puja was like any other girl" (Chakraborty, 2011).

3 "Sunita, a tomboy who preferred to wear shirt and trousers and sport short hair" (TNN, 2016).
4 One [woman]…used to wear pant-shirt[3] (Dainik Bhaskar, 2018b).
5 It is worth noting that…Shobha…always dressed like men and behaved like them (Nai Dunia, 2016).
6 Diseased Gudiya Patro alias Raj Patro lived in the disguise of a boy… (Kumar, 2018).

The use of the term "disguise" in the last quote suggests that the clothing of queer women, which is perceived as masculine, is seen as an attempt to deceive or harm others.

In one report, the police share their investigative observations with journalists, considering it a possible clue to solving the suicide mystery: Station Officer Titawi has stated that Julie, a resident of Mawana's Jhinjhar village, has been consistently wearing boys' clothing from the outset. Similar to boys, she operates a taxi and also takes photographs dressed in men's attire (Amar Ujala, 2020).

However, the reporting becomes even worse when journalists interpret the queer person's deceased body, found after the suicide act, based on binary gender lines, as in the following cases:

1 "'This morning, the bodies of Swapna and Sucheta were found in a field in the village. Sucheta was wearing a sari while Swapna was in trousers and a T-shirt,' the officer added" (The Telegraph, 2011).
2 "Station House Officer, R B Tripathi said, 'One of the girls was dressed in bridal wear while the other was clad like a groom'" (News18, 2005).
3 "Prasad dressed himself in bridal finery and wrote his lover's name in red on his forehead before taking the extreme step" (The Indian Express, 2012).

The mention of clothing that is not aligned with the sex into which a queer person was born is so important to reporters that, in one instance, it appears in the headline: "Disappointed in love, homosexual dresses up in wedding finery, ends life" (The Indian Express, 2012).

Furthermore, another news portal dramatically narrates how the queer person dressed up before the suicide act:

> The rest of the village was engrossed in a wedding taking place in a nearby hamlet, while Gudda, a young dancer in a Ramayan 'mandli,' secluded himself and began adorning attire resembling that of a bride. He chose a red saree accompanied by coordinating jewellery, applied a 'bindi,' lipstick, and makeup, and inscribed the name of his beloved on his forehead, before allegedly hanging himself in the cowshed of a neighbour (Gupta, 2012).

This report extends beyond discussing the external clothing of the queer body found at the scene of death and delves into the inner wear of the deceased person.

In another report, people wonder why a 'good' youth would die wearing women's clothing:

> The family members informed the police that Dipesh's behaviour was respectable, and he had never been engaged in alcohol or any other form of intoxication. In addition to the family's statements, the police are also questioning why Dipesh chose to commit suicide while wearing a saree and assuming a woman's appearance (Haider, 2022).

This suggests that gender transgression is viewed negatively. It is baffling that the focus of the police and family members is on the queer youth's clothing at the time of death instead of on addressing the intolerance that claims lives. Moreover, this report directly stigmatises queer people, portraying them as evil and immoral. Other reports hint at this by mentioning the individual's appearance, which contradicts their assigned sex at birth.

In another report, besides clothing, the behaviour of a queer person that deviates from the behaviour of the sex to which the person was assigned at birth is described: One of them had an appearance and attire resembling that of a boy. Her gait and the cap on her head gave the impression of a boy. Interestingly, she displayed a deep concern for her friend, never letting her friend out of her sight (Bhatt, 2018). This description highlights who played the masculine role in the relationship, showcasing their protective nature towards their queer partner in case it was not evident from their clothing.

5.1.2 Live like husband and wife

In another set of reports, the description of clothing and behaviour contradicting the sex to which one partner in a same-sex couple was assigned at birth is not sufficient to convey to readers the nature of the couple's relations. Hence, these reports describe queer couples as "living as husband and wife" (PTI, 2006) or assign them husband and wife roles. For instance:

1 A gay couple named Raj Patro, alias Gudiya Patro, and Rashmita Nayak, who are living as husband and wife… (Kumar, 2018).
2 "It appears they were inseparable and loved each other like a man and a woman do" (Dasgupta, 2011).
3 Both used to communicate with each other in a manner similar to that of a husband and wife… The accused, Narayan, would address Vishnu as Billu and Babu regarded him as his husband (Dainik Bhaskar, 2018a).
4 "…a same-sex couple lived together as husband and wife for eight years…" (Tomar, 2020).
5 The deceased bodies of two young women, who had been living as husband and wife for a week, were found hanging together from a noose (Dainik Bhaskar, 2018b).
6 "Seeta went missing this afternoon and her 18-year-old 'husband', Vandana, has been locked inside her home" (The Telegraph, 2006).
7 "Twenty-one-year-old Baljit Kaur, the 'husband', took the step in the court of Judicial Magistrate Dimple Walia" (PTI, 2007).
8 "Pinky, the 'father', says she is confident of supporting the two-year-old on the money…" (Dave, 2008).
9 During the investigation, family members revealed that Premprakash Lodhi (23), a resident of Indira Nagar and a friend of Vishnu, had established a homosexual relationship with him. Both considered each other as husband and wife (Dainik Bhaskar, 2018a).

3 This quote, along with the subsequent quotes presented without inverted commas, represents my own translation of news reports originally written in the Hindi language.

It is evident from these examples that even when the reports mention the queer couples' relationships, they tend to use the familiar "husband and wife" terminology, reflecting a heteronormative perspective. Despite the fact that the English language offers gendered and gender-neutral options, reporters consistently prefer the husband and wife binary. This preference is also noticeable in a headline: "Kolkata model Bidisha De Majumder's death mystery deepens as her 'wife' comes into the picture" (Chowdhury, 2022). The journalist could have used terms like "girlfriend" or "partner" but chose "wife" based on "specific evidence":

> [A] friend of the late model shared that Bidisha used to refer to the woman (seen in her Facebook photo) as "bou" (wife)…. Bidisha also used to put sindoor on the woman's forehead during their bridal photoshoots, claiming that only she could do that to her "wife" (Chowdhury, 2022).

Similar to the above quote, the use of wedding rituals to determine who was the bride and who was the groom in a queer couple is repeated here: "[T]he girl brought her 20-year-old 'bride' with 'sindoor' (vermillion) on her head to live in her Jawaharpuri house on Tuesday evening… The 'groom' was then locked inside a room and allegedly consumed some insecticide kept there" (PTI, 2006).

Additionally, one report incorrectly suggests that a couple's behaviour and gender roles changed after they fell in love: Initially, the two shared a profound friendship, but their bond gradually transformed into love. In this relationship, one girl began to adopt a more masculine demeanour, while the other embraced a more feminine expression (Kadir, 2016).

Regardless of whether news reports focus on the appearance, behaviour, or gender roles of queer couples in an attempt to fit them into a heterosexual mould, it is evident that reporters are preoccupied with identifying a man and a woman in the relationship. Such practices reflect the entrenched nature of binary gender paradigms and the extent to which heteronormativity pervades society, even influencing news reports on queer individuals' suicides. At a broader level, the danger of this practice lies in the fact that it perpetuates the restricted and oppressive nature of the gender binary while also erasing the lived experiences and identities of queer individuals (Casper et al., 2022).

In the context of queer suicide, such reports implicitly link deviations from traditional gender expressions to the deaths of queer individuals (Ghosh, 2022, p. 4), thereby shifting blame from societal norms to the individual's gender expression. This phenomenon is reminiscent of how the 1980s U.S. news media portrayed gay men; victims of bullying were often depicted as violating societal gender-role expectations (Paceley and Flynn, 2012, p. 3).

Furthermore, the perpetuation of binary divisions reinforces the erroneous belief that "a queer person can be recognizable by certain attributes, which might be tastes, aesthetic appreciation, particular looks and glances, ways of moving or holding the body, ways of speaking, career choices or other behaviors" (Cover, 2012a, 12). This erases diversity within the queer community, leaving no room for non-normative identities and relationship patterns. To fit into this framework, individuals must adhere to the hierarchical gender structure, perpetuating stereotypes by reducing queer couplehood to one-dimensional portrayals, with one person being feminine and the other masculine, despite the fact that this might not reflect reality.

Queer theory criticises this practice and emphasises the multiplicity as well as the flexibility of gender and sexuality beyond the realm of gender binaries. It is also not in agreement with the notion that relationships should be based on hierarchy or any such idea. Instead, it highlights individuals' power to determine their own identities and characteristics of relations (Regan and Meyer, 2021). However, this independence is removed when assigning gender identities according to heteronormative norms and binary paradigms.

A news organisation should never use media platforms to reinforce heteronormativity via a binary division which would be unacceptable conduct from a responsible media house. Rather, media should focus on providing an accurate representation of queer relationships without reinforcing negative stereotypes. This includes news articles that are characterised by inclusivity, intersectionality, and recognition of differences among experiences within the queer community. This will entail challenging harmful stereotypes as well as breaking down gender and sexual orientation stereotypes; privileging voices from marginalised groups; and representations that encompass all forms of human expression and identity.

5.2 Queer people's uninhibited and predatory sexual conduct

The media's hyper-sexualisation of queer people, particularly women, is not a new phenomenon (Randazzo et al., 2015). From the early days of the AIDS epidemic, when the disease was called "Gay-related Immunodeficiency" (Altman, 1982), to the more recent ban on blood donations from queer people (Jensen, 2021), there has been a tendency to portray queer people as engaging in more promiscuous and reckless sexual behaviour compared to their straight counterparts.

The news reports also contribute to this theme, focusing on queer people's sexual lives and intertwining their stories of suicide with their intimate relationships. Journalists seem particularly interested in depicting queer people's (1) uninhibited sexual conduct and (2) sexually predatory behaviour. Both aspects are discussed in detail below.

5.2.1 Queer people's uninhibited sexual conduct

Reports often use two approaches to describe queer people's careless sexual activities. First, they quote onlookers who describe how the queer individuals were caught or appeared to be displaying uncontrollable sexual behaviour. Second, the journalist becomes an omnipresent narrator describing a queer couple's sexual conduct in the absence of onlookers. Journalists use both approaches to describe intimate details and indirectly indicate that the queer people deserved the fate of death because they had lost sight of the right path and were walking in the wrong direction. Each approach is described in detail as follows.

5.2.1.1 Onlookers' accounts

This approach includes eyewitness accounts of queer people's sexual acts to describe how they were caught engaging in sexual behaviour or public displays of affection, hinting at their careless and unconcerned behaviour. The witnesses or onlookers can include various individuals connected to the deceased queer person, such as friends, parents, neighbours, colleagues, classmates, relatives, and acquaintances. The following quotes illustrate onlookers' descriptions of queer couples indulging in homosexual conduct:

1 "…they were so engrossed in each other that they used to draw attention and vulgar connotations… The girls kept meeting and having their lunch and dinner together from the same plate,' said a relative" (Chakraborty, 2011).
2 One day on Mumbai's Marine Drive, a relative of Rujukta saw them both engrossed in intimate moments (Saxena, 2018a).
3 "After falling in love the prisoners duo developed the relationship and many a times were found in objectionable condition[s] in jail" (FPJ Bureau, 2019).
4 "'We have been told that they had started locking themselves in the bathroom for hours…,' said PI [Police Inspector] M A Singh" (Hindustan Times, 2018).
5 Your daughter was involved in dirty activities (Kumar, 2019).
6 Pahade stated that investigations have unveiled that one of the girl's parents recently discovered the duo in a compromising position (Tiwari, 2008).
7 The family informed us that they had previously witnessed both of them in an objectionable position (Dainik Bhaskar, 2018a).
8 Some time ago, both were found in an objectionable condition (Sharma, 2021).

The last quote is taken from the drophead (deck) of the report, possibly to encourage readers to delve further into the body of the report or because of the journalist's misplaced belief that the matter was important enough to deserve a place in the drophead.

The reports also shed light on the negative impact of the queer individuals' behaviour, which ranges from causing discomfort to others to adversely affecting the entire village. For instance:

1 "'They were so intimate that we did not feel comfortable chatting with them,' said a classmate of Puja" (Chakraborty, 2011).
2 The villagers reported that both of them had held the family's shame in abeyance. Due to the couple's misdeeds, the atmosphere of the village had also started deteriorating (Raghuwanshi, 2023).

Queer couples are either punished or warned of the consequences if they repeat such behaviour. For example:

1 "We have been told that they had started locking themselves in the bathroom for hours. Fearing that their behaviour would adversely affect other employees, their employer sacked the duo," said PI M A Sing (Chauhan, 2018).
2 "…said Gautam, admitting that they would also reprimand the couple for a public display of affection" (Chakraborty, 2011).
3 "The girls were reprimanded and asked to maintain distance" (Tiwari, 2008).
4 "Swapna and Sucheta had been cautioned by villagers on several occasions" (The Telegraph, 2011).

These quotes suggest that the victims—and not the perpetrators of the violence—are being punished. Moreover, the dominant group justifies the punishment inflicted upon them by attributing it to their alleged bad behaviour.

5.2.1.2 Journalistic portrayals and interest in the sexual lives of queer individuals

It becomes increasingly evident that journalists are fixated on queer people's sexual lives when they include information, of questionable veracity, that portrays them In a negative light, even In The absence of eyewitness accounts confirming such behaviour:

1 "The two also had a physically intimate relationship for a long time" (Mirror Now Digital, 2022).
2 They both enjoyed each other's company, and when they openly discussed their sexual desires, a love affair was formed (Saxena, 2018b).

In some cases, the intimate details are so important that they appear in the headline. To quote the first instance: Two lesbian daughters-in-law fell in love…engaged in physical relations, both died within 15 min (Raghuwanshi, 2023). Here, the use of the familial relationship term "daughters-in-law" in the headline intensifies the perceived severity of their supposed crime, suggesting that they crossed the societal boundaries that a married woman with a family is not supposed to cross. Similarly, in the second instance, the following headline hints at the queer couple's supposed immorality and evokes sensationalism: Young man co-habits with eunuch in a room for 6 years and takes drastic step afterwards (News Desk, 2019). However, the body of the report clarifies that the youth was in a live-in relationship with the transgender person for 6 years (News Desk, 2019). The headline implies a different meaning to evoke curiosity.

One report links intimate moments to suicides or tragic events: One day, Bhavna's husband caught sight of her sharing an intimate moment with her friend. The distress from this sight drove him to commit suicide due to overwhelming shame (News18, 2018). However, another news report on the same incident attributes his suicide to the fact that his wife ran away from the house: Kanti was deeply troubled by his wife's attraction to another woman. Tragically, he took his own life when his wife left their home on June 8th (Chauhan, 2018). The comparison of different news reports on the same incident reveals a tendency to sensationalise the suicide story at the expense of queer people.

Journalists do not always approach the narration of queer people's intimate lives in a direct manner. Sometimes, sexual relationships are not explicitly stated but, rather, are hinted at:

1 The two girls spent a substantial amount of time together (Kadir, 2016).
2 Their friendship bore fruit, as Rujukta and Roshni spent entire days together, having a great deal of fun. Before long, a romantic relationship blossomed between the two (Saxena, 2018a).
3 It's likely that he used it to open the shop every Sunday night after business hours, a place where the two friends were frequently seen spending time (Kannan, 2018).

In one case, the journalist attempts to estimate the frequency of sexual intercourse between a queer couple: The two also had a relationship several times. Since Nikki used to be in relationships with other boys as well… (Rawal, 2022).

Furthermore, in one report, homosexuality is depicted as a drug to which people fall prey, leading them to act wildly and lose their

senses: The case involves two female students who were deeply involved in homosexuality to the extent that, despite opposition from their family members, neither could restrain their feelings (One India, 2011).

One report suggests that the police want to investigate and conduct medical tests to find out if the couple had engaged in sexual relations: "Police ha[ve] sent the two bodies for *post mortem* and also pla[n] to conduct medical tests to find out if they had physical relations" (TNN, 2009).

In cases of rape and sexual assault, medical tests are necessary, but in cases involving consensual relations, such tests seem illogical and raise concerns about the media and law enforcement's peculiar interest in the sex lives of queer people. In the broader context, portraying the couple's intimate behaviour as uncontrollable and providing subsequent warnings and punishments are means of absolving the instigator for their actions.

Lastly, news stories that depict the queer population as having uncontrollable and predatory sexual behaviour only serve to validate existing stereotypes and biases against queer individuals, ultimately perpetuating the stigmatisation and marginalisation of this community. Queer theory refutes the claim that any non-heterosexual behaviour is, by definition, abnormal. When the news speaks about the lack of restraint in the sexual activities of queers, they are also solidifying negative assumptions that queer individuals are essentially deviant, aggressive, or ill.

Therefore, representing queer individuals having sex freely promotes a sexuality-focused perspective according to which queer individuals are sexual objects and not human beings with lives beyond their bedrooms. Additionally, it adds to the misbelief that queer sexuality is all about sexual desire without considering the emotional, social and cultural realms of queer people.

Moreover, sensationalised media reports that make unrestrained sexual behaviour among queer people part of a headline may be seen as supporting prosecution or persecution among those populations. Such sensational propaganda supports the introduction of discriminatory practices and policies aimed at further strengthening the suppression of civil liberties.

5.2.2 Queer people's sexually predatory behaviour

Predatory sexual behaviour is considered the most severe type of crime a person can commit, and strict laws are in place to address such criminal conduct. However, some reports attempt to equate queer people with this crime by accusing them of displaying predatory behaviour. In such narratives, friends, roommates, and authorities of deceased queer individuals make accusations of sexual advances. For instance:

1 "Kamran had made several physical advances by touching his body, kissing and hugging" (Firstpost, 2013).
2 "The police said university authorities had [said] they had received complaints against Kamran from many other students" (The Indian Express, 2013a).
3 "At least two junior students had accused Ajay of making inappropriate advances" (Ghatwai, 2012).

Such angles perpetuate the belief that queer individuals are sexually animalistic deviants who cannot control their urges and who engage in predatory behaviour that endangers those around them. This narrative implies that queer individuals bring death upon themselves by crossing the boundaries of appropriate sexual conduct. Queer theory critiques these essentialist perspectives on sexuality and gender by emphasising the variety and complexity of human experiences and challenging the heteronormative belief that queer individuals are inherently deviant or predatory due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Furthermore, the practice of depicting queer individuals as sexual predators in the context of suicide overlooks the structural concerns—such as systemic prejudice, violence, and marginalisation—that contribute to mental health problems in queer populations (Moagi et al., 2021). A study on cyberbullying indicates that victims are often blamed for the bullying they endure, particularly when their sexuality is viewed as deviant (Thornberg, 2015). Similarly, news reports on suicide often blame deceased queer individuals for their own deaths, portraying them as shameful and immoral citizens rather than respectable ones. This flawed logic shifts responsibility away from those who drive queer individuals to suicide and onto the individuals themselves, "cast(ing) suicidal subjects as 'Other'" (Roen et al., 2008, p. 2089). By framing queerness as implicitly causing suicide, these stories become more about deviancy than suicide (Cover, 2012b, p. 1,173). Furthermore, the portrayal of queer people who commit suicide as sexual predators contributes to the criminalisation and persecution of the queer community, perpetuating the idea that queer people are a danger to society.

Moreover, when these derogatory accounts appear in news reports, which are considered nonfiction and factual, there is a higher likelihood that people, especially queer young individuals who often rely on newspapers as their primary source of information on suicide, will believe them to be true (Cover, 2012b, p. 1,173).

To sum up, the news stories about queer suicide are presented in a way that exposes their bigotry and oppressive views by showcasing the uncontrollable and immoral sexual behaviour of individuals. It highlights the importance of challenging heteronormative assumptions and advocating for more authentic and inclusive media portrayals of queer lives, struggles, and successes.

5.3 Abhorrent and frenzied queer love

Sedgwick (2008) mentions age-old arguments against homosexuality, comparing it to paedophilia and bestiality, in order to reject and pathologise it. This demonisation is reflected in news reporting that portrays queer individuals as blinded by immoral love. For instance:

1 The police assert the existence of an illicit relationship between the two (Mirror Now Digital, 2022).
2 Hari Om's family has also acknowledged the relationship and the illicit nature of their connection (Yash Bharat, 2022).
3 Indeed, an unlawful physical relationship existed between the two (Zee News, 2022).
4 The entire incident unfolded in an attempt to prevent the exposure of the secret illegal gay relationship, which would tarnish their reputation in the area (Rawal, 2022).

In these reports, the use of terms like "illicit," "illegal," "homosexual," and "physical" highlights the criminal and/or sexual

nature of the relationships when a simple mention of the relationships would have sufficed. It is worth noting that although the Indian High Court decriminalised same-sex relations in 2018, newspapers continue to criminalise them.

In one report, the journalist expresses disbelief that same-sex individuals can form emotional bonds with each other, using the word "confess" to describe the father's acknowledgement of his daughter's emotional relationship with another girl: Her father also confessed that his daughter had an emotional relationship with the deceased girl. We are curious about how two girls can forge such an emotional bond between themselves (Janta Se Rishta, 2022).

Another report begins with an irrelevant introduction, setting the stage for a tragic queer love story by depicting the irresponsible and rebellious love of the current generation:

> In recent times, numerous incidents are frequently linked to boyfriend-girlfriend, wherein young couples meet, interact, and eventually fall in love. These lovers become so deeply engrossed in their love that it becomes their primary focus, often leading to conflicts with their families. Alarmingly, even young children are getting entangled in relationships that disrupt their lives. Alongside these common narratives, there are also unusual love stories that surface, resembling extraordinary tales. Currently, there's a discussion surrounding the tragic suicides of a transgender individual and a married young man (Naman, 2022).

Another report illustrates the heartlessness of a queer mother who sought shelter with her partner while her daughter cried from hunger: One day, they both contemplated escaping and departed for Ahmedabad. During their stay there for two nights, they struggled to find shelter. Asha's young daughter was also crying due to hunger (News18, 2018).

In one instance, a report blames a queer person's love for the death of a family member, implying that the relationship caused her passing: "It needs mention here that Ankur's mother had passed away 15 days ago and family members cited the duo's relationship as the reason for her passing away" (The Sentinel Assam, 2020).

Certain headlines sensationalise queer relationships, linking them to murder and suicide:

1 What kind of relationship is this? What kind of bond is this? A shocking true incident of brutality and murder in an immoral relationship with a transgender person, followed by suicide (The Sastra, 2022).
2 Murder in sexual relationship with transgender person: Accused hangs himself in fear of infamy (Zee News, 2022).

In some cases, journalists justify parents' attempts to 'cure' their queer children, even if it leads to suicide. For example: Queer girl's uncle justifies the extreme measures, stating that the family wanted to give her a "good life": "[U]ncle, Ajit Mondal, says, 'Let the police do what they want. We wanted to give her (Sucheta) a good life. She chose to die'" (Dasgupta, 2011). Another news report mentions that the uncle's intended "good life" for her involved marrying her off and separating her from her partner (The Telegraph, 2011).

Thus, another frame emerging from queer suicide reporting is the portrayal of queer love as wrong, followed by attempts to persuade individuals to conform to societal norms. This theme can be attributed to the belief that presenting compelling social narratives based on cultural mores would increase audience interest in suicide (Armstrong et al., 2020, p. 14). Consequently, suicide stories in these reports often incorporate elements of queer love and immorality, which defy traditional norms, with the aim of generating and increasing readership. Hence, news stories depicting queer individuals who commit suicide as engaging in abhorrent and frenzied love reveal the underlying prejudices and preconceptions that such narratives perpetuate.

Queer theory counters the common belief that queer love is abnormal simply because it is divergent from heterosexual standards. By depicting it as abhorrent or desperate, media coverage only serves to reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate the notion that all queer relationships are inherently unhealthy or unsafe. Meanwhile, this narrow focus on individual actions undermines efforts to address the structural inequalities that contribute to disparities in mental health among queer populations.

Furthermore, the representation of queer individuals who take their own lives due to deplorable or crazed love leads directly to the path of criminalisation and persecution of the queer population. It sustains the narrative that queer love is a threat to society's standards. Therefore, it reinforces acts of discrimination and legislations that worsen the conditions of inequality and victimisation experienced by queers in society. By addressing structural injustices and fostering empathy as well as acceptance, news reports can contribute to developing an environment supportive of queers dealing with mental disorders. This framing is closely linked with blaming queer relationships for suicides, which will be discussed next.

5.4 Queer relationships: an alleged cause of suicide[4]

That queer people are blamed for their suicides is a well-documented reality (Hein and Scharer, 2013; Finnigan, 2015). Similarly, queer suicide news reports often portray queer relationships as the primary cause of suicide, suggesting that a queer person's identity—and not society's discriminatory attitude towards queer individuals—leads them to take their own lives. The headlines of these reports, which essentially say, "Life lost due to homosexual relationship," suggest that homosexuality is to blame. In contrast, the body of the reports might reveal a different underlying cause. For instance:

> A young man took his own life following a homosexual relationship. [Headline] The family revealed that the accused young man had issued threats to his partner, stating that he would either end his own life or harm his partner if the latter decided to marry. Overwhelmed by fear, the partner eventually took his own life [Body] (Dainik Bhaskar, 2018a).

4 This frame is closely related to the abhorrent and frenzied queer love news frame. However, the distinction lies in the fact that the latter explains how immoral love leads to suicide, while the former only describes the negative aspects of love and its harmful influence on others.

Here, the report's headline blames a young man's suicide on his homosexual relationships, while the body of the report mentions that his actions stemmed from threats from his lover.[5] In another report, the headline links a man's suicide to his depressed state over a homosexual relationship, while the body reveals that blackmail was the true cause:

> Depressed over homosexual relationship, man commits suicide [Headline]…The suicide note discloses that the young man was involved in a homosexual relationship with [a] 15-year-old minor boy, who allegedly engaged in consistent blackmail. As a consequence, the young man tragically took the life of the minor boy before ending his own [Body] (Chhattisgarh Darpan, 2022).

Furthermore, in one report, the headline implies that queer relationships lead to HIV infection, which then causes suicide. However, in the body of the report, it becomes evident that a threatening message from the person's lover was the reason for the suicide:

> Surat: Saree-dress material businessman dies by suicide amid mental stress from HIV resulting from homosexual relationships [Headline]…The Varachha police have filed a case of abetment to suicide following a threatening message from Amandeep, who was involved in a homosexual relationship with the deceased individual, as well as the presence of a suicide note left by the young man [Body] (Loktej, 2022).

In the subsequent quote from the report, the opening paragraph attributes the suicide to the relationship: A shocking incident has occurred in Mumbai, the country's financial capital, that has left everyone stunned. A case of suicide by a girl due to [a] homosexual relationship has come to light (Kadir, 2016).

Similarly, another news report includes a quote from a police official who links the suicide to the relationship: "'The two women committed suicide due to complications arising out of their lesbian relationship,' the official said" (PTI, 2018).

This quote can be interpreted as suggesting that a non-heteronormative relationship leads to complications because it deviates from societal norms. Such an explanation does not address the real issues, such as homophobia or heteronormativity. The resulting implication is that not only journalists but also some police officials lack awareness and understanding.[6]

The same framing continues in the following quote: "The individual who murdered the young man also took his own life by hanging. The motive for the murder was reportedly attributed to the immoral relationship between the two" (Vishwakarma, 2022).

Another news report reinforces the notion that such relationships are immoral by describing how a relationship led to the downfall and death of an individual in the past:

> A similar incident had emerged a few years ago. In Betul, a young man inflicted serious injuries upon himself due to his affection for a transgender individual. Indeed, an illicit relationship existed between the young man and the eunuch. In the course of their relationship, a dispute arose between them, leading the young man to attempt suicide in the presence of the eunuch (Zee News, 2022).

Newspapers' shallow understanding of the cause of suicide is also evident in this case:

> The investigation revealed that the deceased, HariOm Chaure, had been involved in a homosexual relationship with a transgender person named Nikki. The entire incident unfolded only in an attempt to prevent the exposure of the illicit homosexual relationship, which would tarnish his reputation within the community (Rawal, 2022).

However, the report fails to examine why such a relationship is considered illegal despite the decriminalisation of section 377 or why its disclosure would bring shame to queer couples. It overlooks important questions about the underlying heterosexism, which is the real issue, not homosexuality.

In another incident, the news report initially mentions the reason for suicide as being a homosexual relationship. However, upon further reading, one discovers that the real cause was the depression resulting from the individual's 'friend' ceasing communication with him:

> In the suicide note, the student expressed that he was distressed due to a homosexual relationship and subsequently hanged himself… Over the course of a few months, Naman's friend ceased communication with him, leading him into a state of depression (Singh, 2022).

A report covering a separate suicide pact blames the homosexual relationship for the breakdown of a marriage: As a result of her homosexual relationship, a woman began residing at her maternal home instead of her in-laws', eventually leading to the breakdown of her marriage (Raghuwanshi, 2023). The report fails to address such crucial aspects as whether the marriage was forced, the woman's happiness in the marriage, and whether the husband and wife loved each other and were compatible. By attributing the breakup to homosexuality, i.e., linking one negative aspect to another, the report perpetuates the stigma surrounding both homosexuality and divorce.

Another inappropriate headline is as follows: The two women fell in love while working together in the office, and their bodies were discovered 1 day (News18, 2018).

While the headline itself does not directly blame queer relationships for the suicides, the reporter mentions two events: the development of a romantic relationship and the tragic discovery of the deceased lesbian couple. This connection can lead readers to falsely assume that one event caused the other. Instead of shedding light on the discrimination the individuals might have faced due to their identity, the report body sensationalises the matter by mentioning

5 Here, based on the reporters' limited account, we have identified a potential factor. It must be noted that suicide is caused by several factors and cannot be attributed to a single cause.

6 For another example of police negligence towards queer suicides, consider this excerpt from a report: "The police intend to conclude the case, classifying it as a suicide. 'Since both of them have died, what is left to investigate for us?' Yadav said" (Roy, 2020).

unverified information, such as implying that the couple was caught in a compromising position or portraying the mother as callous and insensitive for leaving her daughter hungry (News18, 2018). These negative portrayals contribute to the objectification and hatred directed towards the queer mother.

News headlines blaming queer relationships for suicide reveal underlying biases and heteronormative assumptions. This finding, suggesting a link between queer relationships and suicide, is consistent with other research indicating that the perceived deviancy of non-heterosexuality may contribute to suicidal tendencies (Cover, 2012b, p. 1,173). Queer theory contests this idea that queer relationships are inherently dysfunctional due to their divergence from heterosexual norms. The media reports on suicide associated with queer unions reinforce prejudiced thinking, which further supports the falsehood that queer individuals cannot have strong and meaningful relationships.

Moreover, assigning suicide to queer partnerships worsens the opprobrium and seclusion of queers. It sustains a notion that queer relationships are naturally weaker or maladjustive, thus being supportive of the prejudiced outlooks and practices leading to more marginalisation of queer people.

Because of the above implications, journalists should understand that connecting sexual perversion with suicide cases of queer individuals is inappropriate. Reporters should avoid attaching suicide to unreal or simplistic causes, as it does not solve the underlying problems. Instead, they need to emphasise the links between heteronormativity and its structural violence towards non-heteronormative individuals and relationships. If people do not talk about heteronormativity and how it adversely affects the queer community, violence will continue unabated (Greene, 2013, p. 14).

5.5 Family's rejection of the deceased's queer identity

The following quote, extracted from a news report, describes a deceased transgender individual; one segment of it inspired the title of this paper:

> "The hostel authorities told Mirror that Fathima liked to dress like boys. She also had her hair trimmed. She was a 'nalla kutti' (good child) otherwise, the source said" (Emmanuel, 2018).

This quote implies that society perceives queerness as an undesirable trait. Consequently, it is unsurprising that families often seek ways to reject it. Past studies have focused primarily on family acceptance or rejection of queer individuals after they come out (Baiocco et al., 2015, 2016). However, the news articles in this study shed light on a different aspect: the deaths of children and how those deaths have drawn attention to their sexuality, which some parents might have been aware of or discovered only after the tragic event of suicide. These news reports either completely ignore the queer aspect of the individual's sexuality, hint at it subtly in the subtext, or ambiguously portray it.

Alternatively, the newspapers do not comment on it but quote both sides of the argument, for instance, families' insistence that their children are not queer, contrary to activists' comments or the deceased's pre-death revelation of their non-normative sexuality. This parental refusal stems from the shame that the family feels if the deceased is identified as queer.

To justify this denial, news reports indicate one of the following three reasons: (1) the deceased was close friends with another queer person who either was deceased or survived; (2) the deceased was allegedly forced into queerness by another queer person; (3) the deceased was a straight ally of the queer community; and (4) the deceased was not a queer person. These reasons are discussed further below, with relevant quotes taken from reports.

5.5.1 Narrative of a close friendship

When it comes to a queer couple in which both partners or one partner have died by suicide, news reports refer to them as just friends, while other details in the reports hint at their actual relationship. Following are quotes from suicide reports that downplay the couple's relationship:

1. "Two women committed suicide by hanging themselves… Both were friends" (TNN, 2020).
2. Two girls who shared a close friendship allegedly took their own lives by hanging themselves simultaneously in their respective rooms using scarves (Baluni, 2019).
3. In the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, two friends passed away after ingesting poison (Kapil, 2020).
4. "Under what looked like a suicide pact, two lady teachers… jumped off a drop of 95 ft.… What had apparently upset the two year old friendship of the two women was the transfer order…" (India Today, 2015).

Previous studies have confirmed that India has witnessed a number of double suicides or suicide pacts by female lovers who seek to avoid separation from their partners and subsequent forced marriage to a man (Vanita, 2005; Ghosh, 2022). While some reports provide no information other than describing them as friends, others subtly hint at the individuals' relationship. For instance, in one report, the only clue to the couple's relationship is their death by a suicide pact and the fact that they were close friends (TNN, 2020). In another report, several phrases suggest their relationship, including the reason for their suicide being the transfer order of one of the colleagues, phrases like "till death do us part," the use of "companion" instead of "friends" in certain sections, and statements like they "used to spend the evenings together while their husbands were away on work," along with their photos published with the report (India Today, 2015). In one report, the parents of one of the girls vehemently denied "homosexual theory" and maintained that their daughters were "just good friends" (Kumar, 2019).

Furthermore, in three news reports about a suicide involving a queer youth, one report refers to the person he contacted before his death as a friend, while the other two reports refer to him as a boyfriend:

1. "Abhishek Lahane, Avi's boyfriend… says, 'On July 2, he called me around 5 pm and said he is going to kill himself, without giving any reasons'" (Gowalla et al., 2019).
2. "Police said Avinshu had contacted one of his friends in Mumbai around 5 pm the same day and told him that he was going to kill himself" (TNN, 2019a).

3 "[A] police source said he had spoken to one of his friends in Mumbai the previous day and told the latter that he would take his life" (The Hindu, 2019).

Another news report attributes the suicide of a queer individual to his separation from the person he was in love with, who was getting married. The news report refers to them as friends, but it also indirectly hints at their relationship:

> They told police that six months ago, Raval had gotten engaged. He was disturbed and used to tell the family that his friendship would end when he got married. The two began to stay together for longer periods of time (TNN, 2009).

It is possible that in some cases, the term "friendship" was used as a euphemism for the word "homosexual," which is considered disrespectful.

Another news story, about a suicide pact between a transgender person and a man, consistently refers to their relationship as a "friendship" except in the concluding part:

> In friendship, a eunuch and a young man took their lives by jumping in front of a train. [Headline] The police investigation uncovered that the young man had a friendship with the eunuch… Simultaneously, the police state that the young man was acquainted with the eunuch. They had been living together since September 12. Both of them likely took this step due to someone interfering in their friendship. [Body] It is believed that external factors may have led to this tragic decision stemming from their friendship [Ending] (Rohtak Bureau, 2019).

The following report mentions the friendship between two individuals in its headline, similar to the previously quoted report, and indicates that the end of this friendship was the cause of the person's suicide. However, the body of the report implies that their relationship was more than a friendship: "Dumped by friend, youth ends life [Headline] Family members said that…[Himanshu] befriended a youth 2 years ago. A week ago, Himanshu's friend refused to meet him under family pressure. Himanshu has been disturbed ever since" [Body] (Free Press Journal, 2022).

In another report, the police and the institution where the individual was studying claim that he was queer, though some students deny it:

> Three days later, the police revealed that Kamran was in 'love' with his roommate and had even made several physical advances… Banners and posters contradicting the police claims… have come up on the campus. "Kamran was not homosexual," says one such poster (Zee News, 2013).

In one news report, an activist opines, "Earlier, people would call these incidents 'death of close friends.' Now, the inhibition of using phrases like 'lesbian lovers' has gone" (Dasgupta, 2018b). However, despite this change in perception, several reports (Baluni, 2019; Gowalla et al., 2019; The Hindu, 2019; TNN, 2019a; Rohtak Bureau, 2019; Kapil, 2020; Free Press Journal, 2022) published after 2018 repeat the narrative of describing these individuals as merely good friends. This suggests that the practice of downplaying queer relationships by referring to them as friendships persists.

5.5.2 Converted to queer narrative

Beyond the close friend narrative, another prevalent way to deny an individual's queer identity is by suggesting that they were forced to become queer or were brainwashed into doing so. In one case, family members blamed the partner for the individual's homosexuality, claiming that "his partner… had forced him to alter his lifestyle" (The Indian Express, 2011). However, it is important to note that another news report states that the person publicly came out as homosexual on a reality show (The Indian Express, 2011). Moreover, the headline of the same news report, "Man ends life, family claims he was forced to become gay," (The Indian Express, 2011) emphasises the idea of forceful conversion, making it a crucial aspect of the event, according to the journalist.

In another report, the parents of the deceased assert that other transgender individuals influenced their child to undergo gender affirmation surgery and marry a man:

> Raju did not exhibit typical feminine qualities since childhood. Recently, he connected with Aman Singh and transgender individuals. Two months ago, Raju underwent plastic surgery to undergo a sex change and subsequently married Aman Singh of Birsanagar (Dainik Bhaskar, 2018c).

These instances indicate a lack of understanding among queer individuals' family members, who believe that someone can be converted to being queer. Such narratives might spread misinformation, suggesting that queerness is a contagious disease or that a person can be brainwashed or influenced into becoming queer. The media must provide additional information to readers, clarifying that external influences cannot make straight people queer, just as conversion therapy is ineffective in changing a queer person's sexual orientation.

5.5.3 Straight ally narrative

One news report portrays a queer individual as an ally, thereby masking their actual queer identity. The report highlights the fact that the person was involved in activities aimed at the rehabilitation and improvement of eunuchs and orphans. It reiterates this aspect twice. The report also includes people's responses to the individual's "social service," using terms like "taunt" and "snide remarks" (TNN, 2013). Another report focuses solely on the queer person's "interaction" with the queer community, which disheartened their family, while omitting any mention of their charitable endeavours (The Indian Express, 2013b).

The full scenario becomes apparent through the information contained in another news report, which cites an NGO worker familiar with the individual. This worker stated, "He is a transgender, and danced openly at the rally. TV channels broadcast the footage in the evening news. He returned home and a fight erupted" (Express News Service, 2013).

The newspapers' portrayal of a queer individual as an ally presents an inadequate and skewed view. Newspaper journalists must engage with all relevant parties to ensure an accurate and comprehensive account of the story.

5.5.4 The deceased was not a queer person

In the preceding three sections, the reports presented various explanations for the non-queer status of the deceased individuals, such as being friends with a queer person, being coerced into

assuming a queer identity, or acting as an ally. This section reveals instances in which parents outright rejected the queer identities of their children. A suicide report concerning a queer couple illustrates the dichotomy between one girl's parent accepting her emotional connection with another girl and the other girl's parents adamantly denying it (Janta Se Rishta, 2022). In a different suicide case, one report includes a father's assertion that his son was not gay but, rather, a "simple and religious person" (Namboodiri, 2019). To bolster this stance, the father, in another new report, indicates the pursuit of a heterosexual matrimonial match for his son (Ozarkar, 2019).

The notion that queerness contradicts morality and religious principles and that individuals of strong moral and religious standing would not choose such a path—as reinforced by marriage plans—forms the basis of the father's argument. However, this reasoning is contradicted by the suicide note, which cites "taunting and teasing over his sexuality" as the reason for the individual's suicide, thus challenging the father's assertion that his son was heterosexual (Ozarkar, 2019). In two other news reports concerning a suicide pact, the families dismiss their daughters' queer identities without presenting any counterarguments (News18, 2005; Dwivedi, 2019).

Overall, a family's refusal to acknowledge the deceased's queer identity underscores the challenges and prejudices that queer individuals and their relationships face in terms of acceptance, both before and after death, from their families and society. Activists emphasise that the stigma associated with queerness significantly contributes to suicides (TNN, 2016; Dasgupta, 2018a). Paradoxically, this shame sometimes persists even after a suicide, intensifying due to heightened media and public scrutiny of the act. Consequently, some family members deny this reality rather than confront it.

In addition, when a queer individual dies, the refusal of the family to accept their queerness proves that communities and families are adopting heteronormative ideas. Again, this indicates that people find themselves pressured to live up to society's expectations regarding sexuality and gender. The absence of queer identities from both home and social environments fosters feelings of shame, isolation, and alienation in queer people (Garcia et al., 2020).

Journalists play a pivotal role in concealing the queer identities of individuals who die by suicide. They do this not merely to avoid offending readers but primarily due to the reluctance of the deceased's family to reveal the deceased's identity. Journalists may collaborate in suppressing the queer aspect of suicide reports or support the family in promoting a narrative that disregards the individual's queerness. This approach deprives journalists of a critical opportunity to educate their readers and potentially prevent additional suicides.

5.6 Deficiencies in suicide prevention interventions

According to World Health Organization (2017) guidelines, news reports about suicide should include warning signs and preventive strategies to help those at risk. The inclusion of such information can benefit readers who require support, are dealing with suicidal tendencies themselves, or know someone who is. Unfortunately, queer suicide news stories often lack this essential information. On rare occasions, reports feature opinions and quotes from counsellors, psychologists, sociologists, activists, and individuals from the queer community who have overcome mental health challenges.

Conversely, at times, reports provided inaccurate information and misleading guidance and suggestions that could have been counterproductive and potentially worsened the situation. Examples of these can be broadly divided into two categories: (1) Wrong information: instances of disseminating incorrect information and (2) Fault of the deceased: cases in which the deceased's actions are incorrectly attributed as the cause of the suicide.

5.6.1 Wrong information

In this case, reports cite experts who provide incorrect information by making sweeping conclusions, faulty analogies, or using incorrect terms or descriptions due to their limited knowledge or lack of expertise in queer issues.

In one news report about a suicide pact, a psychologist attempted to convey the notion that queer love is equivalent to heterosexual love by stating, "Their emotions for each other would be the same as one would find in a committed heterosexual relationship" (TNN, 2006). This statement, which aims to promote acceptance of queer people, implies that queer relationships should be accepted only if they match the standards set by heterosexual couples. However, this raises the question of whether, to deserve acceptance, a bond between or among queer people must be similar (committed and monogamous, procreational) to the bonds in heterosexual relationships.

Another report quoted a psychiatrist and sociologist who reduced queer individuals' freedom to love by describing it as "their sexual choices" (Dasgupta, 2018b) or "their preference" (TNN, 2006), respectively. Reducing a person's sexual orientation to a choice or preference is misleading. Research has shown that sexual orientation is influenced by a combination of environmental, emotional, hormonal, and biological factors (WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2022) and cannot be attributed merely to a person's choice.

In another instance, a doctor made the mistake of generalising information about the entire population of India based on a few interactions with queer people and consequently stating that "attempting suicide is a way of letting their parents know about their sexual orientation" (Express News Service, 2015).

Another news report cited an advocate who falsely claimed that "Indian law does not allow for same-sex marriage" (The Telegraph, 2006). In fact, Indian law does not recognise gay marriage but does not criminalise it, and many same-sex relationships openly exist in India (Jain, 2023).

In yet another report, an activist commented, "Earlier lesbians usually came from the elite class. But now, there is no class barrier as such" (TNN, 2006). A news report about a transgender woman who committed suicide quoted another transgender woman who said, "[E]very transgender wishes for sex reassignment surgery" (Antony, 2022). This statement is untrue and misleading, and it perpetuates a myth that must be debunked. The gender affirmation process varies from individual to individual and includes surgical and non-surgical procedures; not everyone requires surgery (Pallarito, 2023).

In conclusion, the inclusion of such comments in news reports is concerning. It highlights the lack of knowledge about the issues being reported. These misconceptions are spread widely, and readers might perceive them as factually correct. Thus, journalists should fact-check such statements before publication.

5.6.2 The fault of the deceased

This category includes opinions and advice from activists and popular queer figures that often fall short of their intended purpose and are dishearteningly marked by victim-blaming. For example, a prominent queer figure offers advice under a sub-heading titled "Suicide is never the solution," conveying the following message: "Our society still views deviation from the gender binary as a curse. Thus, it becomes our responsibility to discover purpose in our lives and maintain self-love, regardless of who engages in discrimination or attempts to bring us down" (Gowalla et al., 2019). The quote places responsibility on the queer individual to struggle and persevere. The quote suggests that, if a queer person were to die by suicide, that person had been unable to discover meaning in life and practice self-love. This sentiment that suicide is not a way to solve one's problems is echoed in a quote from a female politician: "Suicides cannot be considered a solution to any problem" (TNN, 2008).

Furthermore, an activist comparing the reactions of a queer person from the past to the actions of an individual who died by suicide terms the former as better and advises queer people to "toughen up":

> Meanwhile, what really surprises all of us is why did not he reach out to any of the support groups. He could've easily done that, for he was tech-savvy. 10 years ago…two people…reached out to me. That boy called me from an STD booth in Nagercoil. If that happened 10 years ago, I am shocked that this boy did not reach out to anyone in this time when things are quite different, and the support groups are at your fingertips. Yes, bullying based on one's sexual orientation is very vicious and that could lead to self-loathing. But one should toughen up. We all went through it and battled it out on our own (Sah et al., 2019).

In another report, an activist blames queer individuals for remaining in the closet, implying that, by doing so, they have no one to help them when they face challenges: "But, if they remain closet gays, nobody can help them. There's nobody to hold their hand and wipe their tears when danger signals appear" (Chaturvedi, 2012).

In addition, a psychologist blames queer youths for their inability to share their struggles with others: "I am saddened by the fact that youngsters from [the] gay community seclude themselves and do not want to open up to us" (Deb, 2016).

It is deeply concerning that these victim-blaming statements come from sources such as queer activists and mental health practitioners. News reports should refrain from including such statements or quoting individuals who lack knowledge on these issues. A more responsible approach would be for journalists reporting on queer suicides to educate themselves about queer issues and consult experts in queer mental health. This way, reporting can be more sensitive and avoid perpetuating harmful misconceptions and victim-blaming attitudes.

5.7 Pessimistic and dreading tone

The media's portrayal of queer people often reflects a sense of sadness and hopelessness (Legge, 2018; Babayeva, 2019). Consequently, queer suicide reporting is rife with hopelessness and dread. While these elements might contribute to sensational news and increased readership, they also perpetuate a negative image of India, which seems to offer no future for queer individuals.

For instance, in the following example, a transgender activist speaks out against police atrocities that led to the death of a transgender person. However, her statements paint a harsh and cruel image of the world for transgender individuals:

> There is so much violence—structural and sexual violence that the community faces on an everyday basis. We have been pushed to the fringes and margins of society. We are also exploited sexually because most of our survival comes from sex work, there aren't that many jobs for us out there. What's more, men accept our services, but they refuse to pay. They even steal our money and hurt us. No one is ready to accept us at workplaces, public spaces or even their neighbourhoods. When will we be treated as equals? (Paul, 2016).

This quote paints men, public spaces, neighbourhoods, and workspaces in a stereotyped and dangerous light. Similarly, another report about transgender people dying due to heartbreak quotes a transgender activist as saying, "Transgenders are a deprived lot. Left out by parents, they are in constant search for love" (Ommcom News, 2016). This suggests that all parents reject their transgender children at an early age, leading to a lack of love.

Even more concerning is when mental health experts contribute to the adverse environment. In one report, a psychologist states,

> Society does not accept people with such behaviour, and people often criticise them. Often, there are no opportunities for them to grow in our society. They are unsure about their identity and often get depressed as they do not see a respectful life. We need to understand that they are born with such [a] nature and accept and respect them the way they are (Singh, 2020).

The above quote highlights two incorrect generalisations: a lack of opportunity and identity confusion.

One headline in particular has the potential to cause more damage, primarily because of its bold font and prominent placement at the top of the report: "Five suicides since Jan 2021 in Kochi, transgenders seek support" (Antony, 2022). Furthermore, another report, using quotes from suicide notes as supporting evidence, exaggerates the harassment that queer people face:

> Avi's Facebook post is a searing indictment of the harassment that LGBTQI people face in India, despite the reading down of Section 377 of the IPC in September last year. "When I die, I'm going to ask God why he made me like this. I'm going to ask him to not let gay people be born in India because people in India hate gay people—they blame the family and call them all sorts of names," it reads (Ghosh and Ozarkar, 2019).

Suicide notes, written at times of extreme mental anguish, should not be used to prove the extent of the challenges that queer individuals face.

In the United States, HIV and gay identity were once closely linked (Altman, 1982). A similar notion is reflected in the headline, "Suicide among HIV-Positive gays rampant" (Chaturvedi, 2012). However, when one reads the actual article, it becomes clear that the

term "rampant" is based on only two instances of queer men contracting HIV (Chaturvedi, 2012).

In another instance, instead of merely suggesting that society is not accepting of queer people, a headline states, "Better dead than gay? Guy committed suicide after being bullied for homosexuality" (TNN, 2019b). Another headline of a similar nature reads, "LGBT community goes in a huddle as gay youngster commits suicide in the city" (Deb, 2016). The implication is that this suicide endangered the entire community. The body of the report includes other distressing statements, such as "there are many who still find death more comforting" (Deb, 2016).

Another news headline, "Is there anything gay about them?" (TNN, 2006), hints that homosexual people live miserable, unhappy lives. The text of the report reads, "So, how difficult is it for city lesbians to stay afloat in such an unsympathetic environment?" (TNN, 2006). The lead of another problematic piece of reporting reads, "Homophobic slurs have allegedly led to one more death in the country" (Sah et al., 2019). It fails to reference similar incidents in which homophobia played a role in the demise of queer individuals. In addition, it suggests that bullying is a prevalent phenomenon and, in support of that statement, quotes a queer person: "Bullying is not a one-off incident. It's a reality for us from the community that we face 365 days" (Sah et al., 2019). Another activist in the same report says, "People from the community are being bullied everywhere" (Sah et al., 2019).

In addition to portraying a consistently pessimistic view of life for queer singles, newspapers do the same for queer couples, suggesting that their relationships are unlikely to survive societal challenges. One quote exemplifies the difficulty that queer people face in sustaining their relationships: "Society does not accept such [queer] relationships" (TNN, 2006). This broad generalisation might lead queer individuals to believe that their love lives are destined to fail. Another headline, "A lesbian couple's suicide attempt in Mumbai is just one piece of a tragic pattern" (Dore, 2016), is accompanied by the following quote: "If incidents of young women in relationships being driven to commit suicide were to be plotted on a map and along a timeline, there would be a dot in almost each year and each state" (Dore, 2016).

Similarly, the headline "Meerut lash on lesbian couple" (The Telegraph, 2006) uses synecdoche to suggest that the entire city stands against the lesbian couple. The following two headlines also imply that queer couples are destined to experience death as their ultimate fate: "Same-sex relationships: Punished in life, death" (Piyasree Dasgupta, 2011) and "What's the fate of same-sex lovers in times of homophobia?" (Dasgupta, 2018a).

With regard to the second headline, the report judges the fate of queer couples based on two cases of suicide pacts involving queer couples over 7 years, leading to the generalised belief that all queer relationships are doomed. However, the report quotes an activist whose words suggest that the heading is misleading: "I would not say that suicide pacts of lesbian lovers are on the rise in Bengal" (Dasgupta, 2018a). Despite this, the headline does not reflect a positive development; rather, it maintains a terrifying undertone.

Why do the news media frequently depict queer individuals in tragic situations? Sukthankar (1999, p. 23) argues that queer death, love, and elopement are sensational and scandalous. When presented with overstatements and sensational language, these portrayals can instil fear and terror in readers. Studies reveal that reporting practices that provide readers with optimism and assistance in the face of a mental breakdown receive little attention (Kar et al., 2022b, p. 4; Raj et al., 2022, p. 8). On the other hand, sensational language tends to draw more attention (Raj et al., 2022, p. 8). As a result, the news media often adopt pessimistic and dread-filled tones and maintain a limited focus on hope and helpful material, which should be more prominent.

It is important to consider the fact that readers of suicide reports might include impressionable queer youth. Therefore, journalists should avoid portraying India as an inhabitable place for them. Such portrayals might make queer youth susceptible to suicide by causing them to believe that there is no place for them in the world. Unfortunately, some newspapers perpetuate this harmful representation. To address this issue, the media should refrain from exaggeration and instead provide helpful information to address mental health issues.

However, the continuous juxtaposition of suicide, sadness, and queerness can result in these incidents being stereotyped. Thus, it means that suicide is associated with queerness in some way when young people are concerned, as it seems like these are the correct actions for a queer child or adolescent to behave normally in society (Cover, 2012a, p. 12). To compound matters further, portraying queer suicide negatively only serves to amplify the already present stigma and marginalisation towards queer populations.

The reason is that it ultimately justifies hatred against queer people and the inequality they face on a daily basis. If we believe they are not fully human, then why would they deserve rights as humans? Instead of this approach, news stories need to be presented with direct facts, without any kind of sensationalism, and a journalist should retain impartiality rather than a passionate tone (Ramadas et al., 2014, p. 4; Jain and Kumar, 2016, p. 3).

On the other hand, the tragic tone of a narrative might draw attention from indifferent policymakers and encourage the system to take action. Additionally, it might cajole empathetic readers into being more accepting of queer people. However, it is essential to consider the impact that these reports have on young queer individuals who read them. To strike a balance, news reports must highlight the issues while avoiding creating a perception that queer individuals cannot lead happy lives. Reporters can infuse positivity into their stories about suicide by including survivors' stories and conveying the hopeful message that mental health challenges can be overcome.

6 Conclusion

Despite the long period (2005–2022) of study, the frames emerging from the investigated suicide stories have shown little to no significant change. The consistent use of substandard, sensationalist, and stereotypical portrayals of queer people in the media serves to further marginalise and criminalise them, inadvertently causing harm.

Homosexuality was previously a taboo topic; now, reporting on queer individuals has become a means for media outlets to gain readership (Ghosh, 2022, p. 2). Unfortunately, this journey from invisibility to public exposure has resulted in one form of marginalisation being replaced by another. World Health Organization (2014) advocates for a sympathetic representation of suicide in media as a crucial suicide prevention tactic. By identifying insensitive media frames in queer suicide reporting, this research encourages responsible and sensitive media portrayals, ultimately contributing to better mental health outcomes for queer individuals.

From our analysis of Hindi and English news reports on queer suicide cases, several concerning patterns have emerged:

1. Reports often categorise queer couples into gender binary lines based on their appearance and behaviour, portraying them as traditional heterosexual couples. This perpetuates the assumption that queer relationships must conform to societal norms and reinforces harmful stereotypes.

2. News reports frequently delve into explicit details of the couple's sexual behaviour, portraying them as reckless and intoxicated by queer love. This sensationalist approach violates their privacy and depicts them as sexual predators deserving of a deadly fate, thereby exacerbating the stigma against queer individuals. It shifts the blame away from the society and heteronormativity that have actually compelled these individuals to resort to such extreme measures.

3. Family members refuse to accept their children's identities and offer various explanations to journalists. They claim that their children were simply close friends of the deceased, assert that their children were coerced into queer relations by their partners, or state that their children were straight allies, not queer. This refusal to acknowledge a child's true identity implies that parents still view queerness as something that might bring shame upon the deceased individual and their family members.

4. The reporting exhibits a dread-filled and pessimistic tone, depicting queer people as leading unhappy and tragic lives from which death is the only escape. Such portrayals can have a detrimental impact on queer youth, instilling a sense of hopelessness and disinterest in living.

5. News reports tend to cite queer relationships as the primary cause of suicide among queer individuals, overlooking the role of queerphobia and heteronormativity. This implies that being straight is the only path to happiness, further marginalising queer individuals.

These findings underscore the need to educate journalists on sensitively reporting queer suicide cases. A thorough examination of the current journalism course curriculum is necessary to determine if it adequately addresses reporting on news related to the queer community. Any deficiencies in the curriculum should be promptly addressed to equip aspiring journalists with the skills needed to handle queer suicide cases appropriately and with sensitivity. Media organisations must provide training to journalists specifically on reporting queer suicides.

Instances of poor reporting passing editorial checks and being published on news portals without triggering alarms among editors highlight a failure in editors' performance, often attributed to a lack of training or a focus on maximising clicks. This emphasises the need for enhanced editorial oversight and training to ensure responsible reporting on sensitive topics involving the queer community.

Due to the sub-part quality of reporting on queer individuals in India, the LIKHO initiative was established in 2015. Its primary goal is "to encourage sensitive and erudite coverage of LGBTQ issues in the Indian media" (About Likho, 2024). Similarly, in 2022, the independent collaborative journalism project queerbeat was launched to set a precedent for Indian media outlets. Queerbeat seeks to tackle the persistent problems of underreporting and misreporting concerning the identities, stories, and issues of queer individuals, pointing out that mainstream media have frequently overlooked and dehumanised this community (About Queerbeat, 2024). In alignment with this mission, The News Minute and Queer Chennai Chronicles introduced the Inqlusive Newsrooms: LGBTQIA+ Media Reference Guide (Queer Chennai Chronicles and The News Minute, 2023). These initiatives foster optimism regarding a potential enhancement in the quality of queer suicide coverage in both English and regional language media in India.

It should be noted that this study's focus on content analysis limited to Hindi and English newspapers overlooks the vast linguistic diversity of India, encompassing 22 major languages recognised by the Indian constitution (Language Education, 2021). Future research should expand its scope to include other regional languages and thereby comprehensively assess the quality of queer suicide reporting across the nation.

Furthermore, while this research concentrates on written digital print media, there remains a significant gap in understanding the quality of news reporting on queer issues in broadcast media. Separate investigations should be undertaken to evaluate the portrayal of queer individuals in television and radio broadcasts.

Additionally, the absence of interviews with journalists in this study is a limitation. Interviews could offer valuable insights into the current state of journalism education and training regarding queer reporting, as well as identify shortcomings or biases within media practices. The integration of interviews with journalists into future research endeavours would enrich our understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in enhancing media representation of the queer community in India.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

KBJ: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Beyond the Iron Throne: exploring the representation of homosexuality in the series *Game of Thrones*

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Introduction: This research delves into the representation of homosexuality in the television series *Game of Thrones*, adapted from George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga. The study focuses on the navigation and portrayal of homosexual identities and relationships within a historically patriarchal and heteronormative genre.

Methodology: A qualitative research approach, specifically thematic analysis, was utilized to scrutinize the portrayal of homosexuality across all eight seasons and 73 episodes of *Game of Thrones*. The analysis encompassed pivotal scenes, character development, and dialogues related to homosexual representation.

Findings: Thematic analysis revealed several significant themes concerning the representation of homosexuality, including heteronormativity, the interplay of love and war, and the societal and personal impacts of sexual identity. The series portrays the challenges and resilience of homosexual characters, such as Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell, against a backdrop of political intrigue and personal ambition. However, the depiction at times veers into sensationalism, which may potentially desensitize viewers to the real-life struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals.

Discussion: The study findings suggest that while *Game of Thrones* aims to depict homosexual relationships with complexity and depth, it also risks perpetuating negative stereotypes and sensationalizing trauma for dramatic effect. This dual portrayal underscores the broader challenge within popular media to balance representation with responsible storytelling. The study emphasizes the necessity for more nuanced and empathetic portrayals of marginalized groups to promote greater understanding and inclusivity in media narratives.

KEYWORDS

representation, homosexuality, identities, thematic analysis, popular media, marginalized groups

1 Introduction

The fantasy genre has historically adhered to rigid gender norms and heterosexual storylines. However, *Game of Thrones* diverged from these conventions by incorporating diverse sexual orientations, particularly featuring homosexuality in its narrative. The series offers a complex and diverse storytelling experience with multiple viewpoints and critiques. The show has garnered both acclaim and backlash for its portrayal of women and their dynamics with male characters, as well as the lack of positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters. Nevertheless, it has been lauded for its depiction of multifaceted and resilient

female characters who defy traditional gender roles. The Literature Review section provides an overview of current research on gender and sexuality in *Game of Thrones*, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of existing scholarly discussions. It encompasses a range of studies that examine the representation of femininity, different types of masculinity, and exploration of identities in the series, offering a comprehensive context for the present study's exploration of homosexuality. The method section delineates the qualitative research approach employed in the study, outlining the selection of the series' eight seasons and 73 episodes as the material for analysis. It describes the thematic analysis process used to identify patterns and themes related to homosexual representation. The findings and analysis section is organized into main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. The primary themes encompass heteronormativity and the intersection of love and war, with sub-themes delving into culturally acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity, sexual identity passing, and the intricate interplay of love, war, and personal ambition within homosexual relationships. The conclusion encapsulates the study's findings and delves into the implications of the representation of homosexuality in *Game of Thrones* for broader societal understandings of sexual diversity in popular media. It reflects on the potential of such representations to challenge heteronormative norms and contribute to more inclusive narratives.

2 Review of literature

The portrayal of gender in the series *Game of Thrones* has been examined widely. Sandqvist (2012) aimed to contribute to the literary field by providing an intersectional analysis of the power structures in the series. The focus was on female characters, highlighting the prevalence of male-centric power structures in both societal and familial contexts. Jones (2012) emphasized the importance of using archetypal lenses to analyze the variations in gender norms and societal expectations for women between the novel and the TV series adaptation. Laurie (2015) delved into the controversies surrounding sexual violence in specific episodes of the series, comparing the scenes to their counterparts in the books and exploring the portrayal of rape and its implications in the narrative. Clapton and Shepherd (2017) demonstrated how popular culture can disrupt traditional disciplinary mechanisms and highlighted the gendered nature of political authority. They underscored the reinforcement of gender hierarchies and the gendered foundations of political authority, as exemplified by characters like Daenerys in the series. Ucan (2017) discussed the feminist potential and postfeminist complexity in the representation of women in the story, emphasizing the importance of scholarly works covering various aspects of the series. Singh and Singh (2018) found that the series portrayed subversive and diverse gender and sexual expressions through characters like Lord Varys, Yara, Renly, and Loras. Zare (2019) discovered modest representations of gender role attributes in the characters of *Game of Thrones*, with significant differences between female and male characters, and highlighted the series' challenge of stereotypical gender roles, particularly for female characters.

The representation of women characters in the series has also been a topic of study. Shubham (2022) expressed disapproval of the excessive display of nakedness of women in the show, seeing it as a tactic to retain audience interest. Bollinger-Deters (2018) explored the intersection of high fantasy creative fiction with historical hierarchal oppressions, emphasizing racialized patterns, inclusivity, and the influence of historical contexts on fictional characterizations. Rai (2017) highlighted the contrasting traits and approaches to power between Daenerys and Catelyn, with Daenerys being portrayed as confident and ambitious, relying on external forces, while Catelyn embodies a motherly discourse of power focused on cooperation and empowerment.

Some of the existing literature has contributed to the understanding of the portrayal of masculinity in the series. Johnston (2022) examined how social abjection is used to delegitimize subordinate and marginalized masculinities, suggesting that incorporating abject masculinity (expressions of masculinity that are pushed to the margins of societal norms and become abject) could help challenge patriarchal violence and recover marginalized masculinities. Tan (2018) discussed masculinity as a social construct with various types and representations, including hegemonic masculinity, which is portrayed as the dominant form encouraged by patriarchal society. Characters like Tyrion Lannister represent complicit masculinity, striving for hegemonic traits despite limitations. Ramsay Bolton embodies extreme aggression and sadism, showcasing characteristics of hegemonic masculinity through his brutal and cruel actions (Kehoe, 2021). His crimes and acts of aggression, influenced by notions of hegemonic masculinity, include torture, sexual violence, murder, and psychological manipulation to assert power and dominance. The toxic consequences of hegemonic masculinity[1] in Westeros society are exemplified through Ramsay's behaviors, indicating a need for a shift away from the glorification of violence and power struggles to prevent further harm and destruction. Evans (2019) highlighted the critique of normatively masculine violence and the exploration of alternative masculine discourses and queer kinships in the fantasy genre. These findings emphasized the potential for challenging patriarchal norms and power dynamics through complex narratives in the series.

The researchers also explored the role of identity to understand the characters better. The role of identity, particularly about gender and sexuality, is a prevalent theme in the field of queer studies and the portrayal of characters in *Game of Thrones*. Identity encompasses how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others, shaped by a variety of social, cultural, and personal influences. In the context of this analysis, examining identity is crucial to understanding how characters navigate their sexual orientations and societal expectations within the world of Westeros. Judith Butler's theory of performativity in her book *Gender Trouble* published in 1990 is indispensable in comprehending identity in this context (Butler, 1990). Performativity posits that identity is

1 Abject Masculinity represents a form of masculinity that is "neither subject nor object" as described by Julia Kristeva in Powers of *Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). It is based on the idea of rendering undesirable qualities and entities abject, ostracizing them from acceptable expressions of masculinity and leading society to reject them with horror, disgust, or contempt (Kristeva, 2024).

not an intrinsic essence but rather is shaped through repeated actions and behaviors. This viewpoint is valuable in dissecting characters such as Renly Baratheon and Ser Loras Tyrell, who frequently conceal their homosexual identities to adhere to societal norms of heteronormativity. Their actions mirror Butler's argument that identities are performed and reinforced through social conventions and behaviors. Moreover, the depiction of characters such as Yara Greyjoy in the series challenges conventional gender norms and emphasizes the diversity of gender identity. Yara possesses both typically masculine and feminine characteristics, rejecting rigid gender classifications. This reflects the principles of queer theory, which promotes a broader and more embracing concept of identity (Salih, 2007). Lovric and Hernandez (2019) examined how *Game of Thrones* depicted non-white identities through orientalist and hegemonic lenses, highlighting the perpetuation of power dynamics and stereotypes in the show's character representations. Jones (2009) focused on how queer men experienced their identities, emphasizing the themes of intersectionality, body positivity, political commitments, ideological tensions, and the development of queer consciousness. Olesker (2020) highlighted the importance of identity and normative commitments in determining the success of alliances, noting that the survival of characters within alliances was not guaranteed if their normative commitments did not align with the alliance. The study also suggested that identity and norms were crucial in power transitions and alliance formation.

Kaplan (2017) surveyed the portrayal of sex and non-normative bodies in the television show *Game of Thrones*, with a focus on the character Tyrion Lannister, who had dwarfism. Despite the narrative empowerment and cinematographic adaptations for Tyrion, the show did not treat his sex scenes the same as those of other main characters. *Game of Thrones* demonstrated ambiguity in its approach to pushing boundaries in depicting sex and different body types. Yunara and Kardiansyah (2017) explored the presence of the animus imprint in female characters, specifically Arya Stark and Sansa Stark, from the novel *A Song of Ice and Fire: A Game of Thrones*. The study revealed that both characters exhibit masculine imprints or animus within their characteristics, with Arya Stark displaying the animus personality across the first three stages of animus development.

However, there is a dearth of research that has explored the representation of homosexuality in the series *Game of Thrones* through the prism of various themes. The objective of the thematic analysis was to address the research question: How is Homosexuality Represented within the series *Game of Thrones*?

3 Method

To address the research question, the researchers employed qualitative research methodology. Thematic analysis of the series *Game of Thrones* was used to examine important episodes, character development, and dialogues about the representation of homosexuality (Towbin et al., 2004).

3.1 Materials

Eight seasons of the series *Game of Thrones* containing 73 episodes in total were selected for the study. The running time for each episode is 50–82 min approximately. The entire show (including the episodes that did not have homosexual content) was analyzed so that the researchers could comprehend the narrative. Viewers can watch episodes in chronological order on streaming platforms such as JioCinema, Max, etc., The streaming service, JioCinema was utilized to access each episode of the series.

3.2 Procedure

Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary qualitative data analysis method for identifying patterns across multiple data sources (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2012). The procedure of data collection for the thematic analysis in the present study was borrowed from Towbin et al. (2004) in which feature films were analyzed thematically. The show was watched four times in its entirety before it was rewatched exclusively for identifying units of data. A unit of data could be identified from the time frame in which a particular scene took place in an episode of a certain season, relevant to the research question. A unit of data could be extracted from a scene, for example, in which the homosexual lovers Ser Loras Tyrell and Renly Baratheon look at each other and are not able to convey any form of pleasantries or affection toward each other as they do not explicitly acknowledge their homosexual love in front of the crowd leaving them with no verbal input. On the other hand, Ser Loras shows his respect and admiration for Lady Sansa Stark by giving her a flower without hesitation, and the crowd starts cheering for them. It appears that their physical positioning could indicate an attempt to conceal their sexual identity. In addition to visual cues, dialogues among the characters were also recorded as data units. In this case, the speech would be transcribed accurately, and subtitles would be used for greater precision. The collection of visual and verbal data was crucial for capturing implicit messages related to homosexuality.

4 Findings and analysis

4.1 Representation of homosexuality in *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019)

The characters who exhibited homosexual tendencies were Renly Baratheon, Ser Loras Tyrell, Oberyn Martell, Ellaria Sand, and Yara Greyjoy. Emphasis was given to the characters Renly and Loras for maximum screen space compared to other homosexual characters.

4.2 Main theme: heteronormativity

Game of Thrones portrays heteronormativity through the actions and beliefs of male and female characters. Heteronormativity refers to the societal expectations that heterosexuality is the standard norm and any deviation from this

norm is often stigmatized (Chambers, 2007). The series depicts a negative attitude toward non-heteronormative relationships. The characters Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell face discrimination and criticism for their homosexual relationship. This reflects the societal bias against same-sex relationships within the world of Westeros. Here are some of the sub-themes that substantiate the presence of heteronormative concepts in the context of homosexuality.

4.2.1 Sub-theme: the culturally acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity

In *Game of Thrones*, the culturally acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity are deeply embedded in the societal norms and traditions of Westeros. The world of Westeros places a high value on political strength, patriarchy, and physical and sexual dominance over women, associating these qualities with ideal masculinity (Connell, 1995). Firstly, Robert Baratheon's statement from the below extract reflects a hyper-masculine worldview prevalent in the patriarchal society of Westeros:

> Robert Baratheon: You ever f*** a Riverlands girl?
> Renly Baratheon: Once. I think.
> Robert Baratheon: You think? I think you'd remember. Back in our day, you weren't a real man until you'd f*** one girl from each of the seven kingdoms and the Riverlands. We used to call it "making the eight"
> Renly Baratheon: Those were some lucky girls. (S1:E6, units 28–29)

His measure of manhood is tied to sexual conquests, reinforcing traditional gender roles where male prowess is validated through sexual exploits. The notion of "making the eight" implies a crude form of masculinity, where men are expected to assert dominance and control over women. Renly's response, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a mild form of resistance or subversion to his brother's machismo. By acknowledging the girls as "lucky," Renly subtly challenges the objectification of women inherent in Robert's worldview. However, his response also reflects a level of complicity or conformity to societal norms, as he does not outright condemn Robert's perspective. Furthermore, the emphasis on "making the eight" highlights the importance of regional identity and unity within the Seven Kingdoms. Sexual conquests become a metaphor for political alliances and power dynamics, suggesting that relationships and interactions between individuals are often influenced by broader socio-political contexts. Overall, this dialogue illustrates the complex interplay between gender, power, and identity in the heteronormative world of Westeros:

It could also be inferred that men were not considered real men and they were not conformed to the gender norms of masculinity if they had not had a physical intimation with eight women from different regions. King Robert, who adhered to the concept of heteronormativity in this context, represents "the culturally acceptable form of masculinity." It appears that Renly provided a false statement after being asked the question about his sexual encounter with a girl from Riverlands. The reason for his lying is not to fall out of gender norms that are considered "normal," "masculine" and "culturally acceptable" (Courtenay, 2000).

The physical bodies of women are often objectified and used as tools for political alliances or personal gain (Bordo, 1994). For reference, Cersei Lannister could be considered "the culturally acceptable form of femininity" (Schippers, 2007) within the context of the series and one of many who despise homosexual individuals. On several occasions, she expresses her wish of having been born a man:

> Cersei Lannister: I should have been born a man. I would rather face a thousand swords than be shut up inside with this flock of frightened hens.
> Sansa Stark: They are your guests under your protection. You asked them here.
> Cersei Lannister: It was expected of me as it will be of you when if you ever become Joffrey's queen. (S2:E9, units 27–28)

Cersei Lannister's statement, "I should have been born a man," reflects a longing for power and agency within the constraints of patriarchal society in Westeros. Cersei's assertion that she should have been born a man suggests that she believes her gender has limited her ability to wield power effectively. In the patriarchal society of Westeros, men traditionally hold positions of authority, while women are often relegated to subordinate roles. Cersei's desire to have been born a man indicates her frustration with these gender-based constraints and her recognition of the privileges afforded to men in her society. Furthermore, Cersei's statement about facing a thousand swords rather than being confined with "frightened hens" underscores her disdain for the perceived weakness of women. She views the other women present as timid and passive, contrasting sharply with her desire for action and agency. This highlights Cersei's rejection of traditional gender norms and her refusal to conform to the expectations placed upon her as a woman.

4.2.2 Sub-theme: sexual identity passing

The concept of sexual identity passing (Harrison, 2013) is merely the concealment of one's gender identity or sexual orientation to pass as what is generally regarded as "normal" in the cultural and sociological contexts. The two most prominent characters who want to fit in the idea of heteronormativity and pass as heterosexuals are Renly Baratheon and Ser Loras Tyrell. The character of Ser Loras Tyrell can be interpreted as a case of sexual identity passing within the context of the story. Despite being openly gay to those close to him, Loras presents himself publicly as the epitome of traditional masculinity, earning him the moniker "The Knight of Flowers." His outward performance of heterosexual norms and ideals conceals his true sexual orientation from the broader society of Westeros, where such identities are often stigmatized or even punishable:

> Sansa Stark: (looking at Ser Loras Tyrell) "The Knight of Flowers"
> Ser Loras approaches Sansa, sitting on a horse, leaning toward her and giving her a flower.

> Sansa Stark: Thank you, Ser Loras.
> Loras looks at Renly. Renly nods at him suggesting that he should go and win the combat. (S1:E5, unit 6)

Sansa Stark's interaction with Loras, coupled with his exchange with Renly, can be viewed through the lens of sexual identity passing. When Sansa refers to Loras as "The Knight of Flowers," she may not only be acknowledging his renowned chivalry and elegance but also subtly engaging with the facade he presents to the world. By accepting the flower he offers, Sansa participates in the performance of heterosexual courtship rituals, further perpetuating Loras's outwardly heterosexual identity. Loras's glance toward Renly, followed by Renly's nod of encouragement, adds depth to this interpretation. Renly, who shares an intimate relationship with Loras, understands the complexities of Loras's dual identity. His nod can be seen as a silent affirmation of Loras's performance and a reminder to maintain the illusion of heterosexuality, especially in public settings where scrutiny is high. This scene highlights the challenges faced by individuals like Loras who navigate a society that enforces rigid gender and sexual norms. Loras's ability to pass as heterosexual grants him certain privileges and opportunities within the patriarchal power structures of Westeros, but it also necessitates constant vigilance and concealment of his true self. Sansa, Loras, and Renly become a poignant exploration of the complexities of sexual identity passing, the performance of gender roles, and the intersections of power and privilege in the world of *Game of Thrones*.

On the other hand, bisexual characters like Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand challenge heteronormativity in contrast to more conservative regions in Westeros. They are also in contrast with what is being called "sexual identity passing." Oberyn Martell is known as the Red Viper and Ellaria Sand is his paramour from Dorne. They share an open and unconventional relationship and they are both depicted as sexually adventurous and open-minded. Their sexual identity is fluid. The portrayal of Dorne as a region more accepting of diverse sexualities challenges the heteronormative norms seen in the other parts of Westeros.

By featuring characters with diverse sexual orientations, the narrative contributes to the visibility and representation of the LGBTQ+ community to some extent. This representation is crucial in challenging heteronormativity by showing that characters with non-heterosexual orientations can be complex and integral to the story.

4.3 Main theme: love and war

As the story progresses, the concepts of love and war become entangled with the characters' struggles with their sexual orientations. The consequences of being perceived as different, whether due to one's sexuality or other factors, are evident throughout the narrative. The themes of love and war (Kumar and Kumar, 2023) are often woven into the fabric of the characters' lives, influencing their decisions and relationships in a world where survival often depends on alliances, loyalty, and the pursuit of power. There are two sub-themes within the main theme Love and War which will be explored below.

4.3.1 Sub-theme: all's fair in love and war

In the following extract, the dynamics between Renly Baratheon and Ser Loras Tyrell can be interpreted through the lens of "All's Fair in Love and War," highlighting the complexities of power, manipulation, and personal ambition within the context of representing homosexual relationships in the series:

> Renly Baratheon: Brienne is a very capable warrior. And she is devoted to me. You are jealous.
> Ser Loras Tyrell: Jealous? Of Brienne the beauty? Don't make me laugh.
> Renly Baratheon: (proceeds to undress him) "'I'll make it up to you."
> Ser Loras Tyrell: (gets upset) No, Your Grace. Not tonight. There is another Tyrell who requires your attention. You didn't win my father's support or his army on charm alone.
> Renly proceeds to have physical intimation with him again. But Ser Loras stops him.
> Ser Loras Tyrell: Your vassals are starting to snigger behind your back. Brides aren't usually virgins two weeks after their wedding night.
> Renly Baratheon: And Margaery is a virgin?
> Ser Loras Tyrell: Officially. Shall I bring her to you? (S2:E3, units 27–29)

Renly's initial attempt to dismiss Loras's concerns about jealousy by seducing him illustrates the blurred lines between love and power in the world of Westeros. Renly, aware of Loras's devotion and loyalty, seeks to placate him through physical intimacy, leveraging their homosexual relationship to maintain control and secure Loras's allegiance. However, Loras's refusal to be swayed by Renly's advances underscores his agency and ambitions within the power dynamics of their relationship. Despite his love for Renly, Loras recognizes the importance of political alliances and the need to prioritize the interests of House Tyrell. His insistence on Renly's attention being diverted to securing the support of other Tyrell family members reflects his understanding of the broader political landscape and the necessity of strategic maneuvering. The exchange between Renly and Loras also reveals the manipulative nature of their relationship, where affection and desire are intertwined with power plays and ulterior motives. Renly's disregard for Loras's concerns about their public perception and his insistence on physical intimacy despite Loras's reservations highlight his sense of entitlement and arrogance as a nobleman. Loras's reference to Margaery Tyrell's virginity and his offer to bring her to Renly further underscores the transactional nature of marriage and alliances in the world of *Game of Thrones*.

In a society where women are often treated as pawns in the game of politics, Loras's willingness to offer his sister's chastity to appease Renly demonstrates the lengths to which individuals are willing to go to advance their own ambitions and secure power. Overall, this scene encapsulates the complex interplay of love, power, and manipulation and the negative representation of homosexuality.

4.3.2 Sub-theme: politics of power

The concept of Politics of Power is significant in understanding homosexuality within the context of the series (Sandqvist, 2012).

One cannot function without the other. In this scene from *Game of Thrones*, the dynamics between Margaery Tyrell and Renly Baratheon can be analyzed through "Politics of Power," illuminating the intricate ways in which individuals manipulate relationships and alliances to consolidate and maintain power. Margaery seeks to use her marriage to Renly as a means of enhancing the power and influence of House Tyrell:

> Margaery Tyrell: Your enemies aren't happy about us. They want to tear us apart. And the best way to stop them is to put your baby in my belly. We can try again later. You decide how you want to do it. With me or with me and Loras. However else you like. Whatever you need to do. You are a king. (S2:E3, unit 29)

Margaery's proposition to Renly is a calculated move aimed at solidifying their political union and strengthening Renly's claim to the Iron Throne. By suggesting that Renly impregnate her, Margaery demonstrates her understanding of the importance of heirs in securing dynastic legitimacy and stability. In a world where power is often secured through bloodlines and inheritance, Margaery's offer is a strategic maneuver to bolster Renly's position as a king.

Moreover, Margaery's acknowledgment of their enemies' intentions to undermine their relationship underscores her awareness of the political threats they face. In the ruthless *Game of Thrones*, alliances are constantly tested, and Margaery recognizes the necessity of preemptively addressing any vulnerabilities, here in this case, homosexuality, could be exploited by their adversaries. Margaery's willingness to accommodate Renly's homosexual preferences, whether it be involving Loras Tyrell in their arrangement or allowing Renly to decide the specifics of their intimate encounters, reflects her pragmatic approach to power.

Furthermore, Margaery's reminder to Renly of his status as a king serves as a subtle assertion of her authority and influence within their relationship. Despite Renly's royal title, Margaery asserts her agency and autonomy, positioning herself as an equal partner in their political endeavors rather than a mere pawn or consort.

Overall, this scene exemplifies the "Politics of Power" paradigm by showcasing the strategic calculations, manipulative tactics, and power dynamics at play within the world of *Game of Thrones*. Through Margaery's proposition to Renly, we witness the intersection of personal ambition, dynastic politics, and intimate relationships, highlighting the multifaceted nature of power in the pursuit of the Iron Throne.

There is another instance that exemplifies the politics of power concerning homosexuality in the story. In the following exchange between Tywin Lannister and Olenna Tyrell, the "Politics of Power" reveals the strategic maneuvering and manipulation employed by both characters to advance their respective agendas and maintain control over their family legacies:

> Tywin Lannister: The only thing that might turn it are details of your grandson's nocturnal activities. Do you deny that?
> Olenna Tyrell: Oh, not at all. A sword swallower through and through.
> Tywin Lannister: And a boy with his affliction should be grateful for the opportunity to marry the most beautiful woman in the kingdoms and remove the stain from his name. (S3:E6, unit 33)

Tywin Lannister's assertion that details of Loras Tyrell's homosexuality illustrate the ruthless pragmatism with which he approaches politics and familial alliances. By leveraging this knowledge, Tywin seeks to coerce Olenna into compliance. Olenna Tyrell's acknowledgment of Loras's homosexuality by saying "a sword swallower through and through" reflects her pragmatic approach to politics and power. As the matriarch of House Tyrell, Olenna understands the importance of securing advantageous alliances for her family, even if it means overlooking or downplaying certain indiscretions or scandals. By openly acknowledging Loras's orientation, Olenna demonstrates her willingness to confront uncomfortable truths and navigate the complexities of courtly intrigue.

Tywin's insistence that Loras should be grateful for the opportunity to marry Cersei and thereby "remove the stain from his name" highlights the transactional nature of marriage alliances in Westeros society. In Tywin's view, the marriage serves as a means to restore Loras's reputation and solidify the alliance between House Lannister and House Tyrell, regardless of the personal feelings or desires of the individuals involved.

Overall, this exchange exemplifies the "Politics of Power" paradigm by showcasing the strategic calculations, manipulation, and negotiation tactics employed by Tywin Lannister and Olenna Tyrell to further their respective interests and maintain control over their family legacies. Through their dialogue, we gain insight into the complexities of power dynamics and alliances within the world of *Game of Thrones*, where personal relationships are often subordinate to larger political ambitions.

4.4 Main theme: homophobia

The portrayal of homosexual characters and themes in *Game of Thrones* has been a subject of criticism (Evans, 2019; Hardy, 2019) for its representation and the fate of certain characters. Opinions on this aspect of the show may vary among viewers. Additionally, the probability that anyone could die is worth noting in the story. It is also worth noting that male characters like Renly Baratheon, Oberyn Martell, and Loras Tyrell who have exhibited homosexuality have all been brutally killed in the show in one way or another. It is one of the many aspects which could contribute to the cause of homophobia.

4.4.1 Sub-theme: homosexuals as "degenerates"

In the context of homophobia, there are instances in the early seasons of the show where characters use derogatory language related to homosexuality or exhibit homophobic attitudes. Concepts like homosexuality were not defined precisely in medieval settings (Johansson and Percy, 2009) in the same way as it is in today's contemporary times. The show uses terms relevant to the

world it portrays. So, it is important to note that these instances are often portrayed within the context of the medieval society in which the story is set. Words like "homosexuals," "bisexuals," "gays," "lesbians," "transgenders," etc. have never existed or been used in the entirety of the series. The most commonly used word for people who exhibit homosexuality is "degenerates," a negative connotation that could mean "one who has lost or has become deficient in the qualities considered proper to the race or kind; a degenerate specimen; a person of debased" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024).

In the following exchange, Margaery Tyrell expresses her frustration with her husband, Renly Baratheon, for his apparent disinterest in consummating their marriage and producing an heir. She describes Renly's avoidance of intimacy and his reluctance to engage in sexual activity that could result in conception. This reluctance, according to Margaery, led her to question her fertility and desirability as a wife:

> Margaery Tyrell: Whenever I wanted to make a child with him, he had so many excuses, so many late-night war councils. He never wanted to try… except one evening. After he had far too much wine to drink, he suggested something. Something that sounded very painful and couldn't possibly result in children. Maybe the fault was with me.
> Joffrey Baratheon: No, he was a known…degenerate.
> Margaery Tyrell: It is such a relief to hear you say so, Your Grace. (S3:E2, units 39–40)

Joffrey Baratheon interjects with the assertion that Renly was a "known degenerate." Here, the term "degenerate" carries strong connotations of moral decay or deviation from societal norms. Within the framework of homosexuality as degeneracy, Joffrey's statement implies that Renly's homosexuality is inherently immoral or perverse. Margaery's response, "It is such a relief to hear you say so, Your Grace," can be interpreted as her tacit agreement with Joffrey's characterization of Renly. In a society where heteronormativity is deeply ingrained, Margaery's relief may reflect a sense of reassurance that her marital struggles were not entirely her fault but rather attributable to Renly's perceived deviance.

Language shapes attitudes and beliefs, and using derogatory terms reinforces negative stereotypes and prejudices against homosexual individuals (Carnaghi et al., 2011; Cervone et al., 2021). It perpetuates a culture of intolerance and discrimination, making it more difficult for them to live authentically and without fear of judgment or harm. The term "degenerates" carries strong negative connotations and has been used to demean and dehumanize homosexual individuals like Renly in this context, deemed to be morally corrupt or socially undesirable.

4.4.2 Sub-theme: punishment

In *Game of Thrones*, punishment operates within the framework of a feudal society where justice is enforced by various authorities such as lords, kings, and religious institutions. Punishments can vary widely depending on multiple factors (Harrison, 2013; Evans, 2019), including the nature of the offense, the status of the perpetrator, and the whims of those in power. Common forms of punishment depicted in the series include execution, exile, torture, imprisonment, mutilation, and shaming. It should be noted that being a homosexual is not a predetermined offense with a specific punishment in the series. However, it is considered a perversion by those who exhibit homophobia.

In the story, the Faith Militant also known as Sparrows is a religious order that follows the dominant religion of "The Seven." The show portrays The Faith Militant as a strict enforcer of their interpretation of the faith's teachings, with a conservative and traditionalist outlook (Benioff et al., 2011–2019). Their stance on homosexuality is one of no tolerance, and they are shown to be expressing this view unequivocally.

The dialogue between the Faith Militant and the man they confront is charged with homophobic slurs and violence, reflecting a society where homosexuality is not only stigmatized but also met with severe punishment:

> Faith Militant: C***suck***! Boy Fuc***! You buggering filth! There is a special place in the seventh Hell for your kind.
> Man: Please. Please. I will pay. I'll pay all of you.
> Faith Militant: Yes. You will! (slides him with a knife and the man screams). (S5:E4, unit 10)

The Faith Militant's use of derogatory terms like "c***suck***," "boy fuc***," and "buggering filth" highlights their deep-seated prejudice against individuals who engage in same-sex relationships or acts. The Faith Militant's verbal abuse serves not only as an expression of disgust but also as a justification for the violence they inflict. By labeling the man as morally corrupt and deserving of punishment, they position themselves as enforcers of societal norms, particularly regarding sexuality. The mention of a "special place in the seventh Hell" further emphasizes the religious condemnation of homosexuality, suggesting that it is not only a social taboo but also a sin deserving of eternal damnation. In this context, the punishment inflicted upon the man for his perceived homosexuality is not only physical but also symbolic of the societal rejection and condemnation faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in such a society. This scene serves as a stark reminder of the discrimination and violence faced by marginalized communities in the pursuit of love and acceptance.

After gathering evidence and testimony, the High Sparrow, the leader of The Faith Militant announces that there is a handful of evidence to proceed with a trial for both Ser Loras Tyrell and Queen Margaery Tyrell. It is important to note that Queen Margaery is one of the few characters in the story who does not view homosexuality as a sin. She has known about her brother's sexuality for a long time. She tries defending her brother in front of The Faith Militant and the High Sparrow by falsely denying him being homosexual, leading to her imprisonment along with her brother:

> High Sparrow: The Faith is satisfied there is enough evidence to bring a formal trial for Ser Loras and Queen Margaery. (S5:E6, unit 39)

The show does not delve into why The Faith views homosexuality as a sin. The religion itself has seven aspects, and none explicitly condemns same-sex relationships. As a result, punishments may not always be proportional or just, and innocent characters may suffer as a result of the actions of those in positions of authority.

4.4.3 Sub-theme: trauma

While imprisoned, Loras is subjected to psychological and physical torture, which includes being questioned about his sexual relationships. Loras, faced with the oppressive religious authority of the High Sparrow and the judgmental gaze of the crowd, is compelled to confess to crimes. His confession includes his sexual relationships with other men, particularly Renly Baratheon, as well as his acknowledgment of perjury and various moral transgressions. In this following scene, Loras Tyrell's confession to the High Sparrow can be analyzed through the sub-theme of "trauma":

> High Sparrow: To which crimes will you be confessing?
> Loras Tyrell: All of them. I lay with other men including the traitor Renly Baratheon (crowd murmuring). I perjured myself before the gods. I am guilty of depravity, dishonesty, profligacy, and arrogance. I see that now. I humble myself before The Seven and accept whatever punishment the gods deem just. (S6:E10, unit 6)

Within the context of the oppressive and heteronormative society depicted in the series, Loras's admission of homosexuality is framed as a grave offense against both religious doctrine and societal norms. The act of confessing to his homosexual acts and other supposed crimes can be seen as a manifestation of the trauma inflicted upon Loras by his society's rejection of his sexual orientation. In this paradigm, the pressure to conform to heteronormative standards and the fear of punishment for deviating from them have caused him profound psychological distress. His willingness to humble himself before the gods and accept punishment reflects not only his internalized shame and self-loathing but also his desperate attempt to seek absolution and alleviate his suffering.

The murmurs from the crowd further underscore the societal stigma attached to homosexuality and the scrutiny to which LGBTQ+ individuals are subjected. Loras's public confession exposes him to ridicule, condemnation, and potentially severe repercussions, amplifying the trauma he experiences as a result of his sexual orientation. The High Sparrow's role in eliciting Loras's confession and determining his punishment highlights the intersection of religious authority and LGBTQ+ oppression. In this paradigm, the religious institution serves as a tool of societal control, perpetuating the trauma experienced by queer individuals like Loras through condemnation and punishment.

It also marks a tragic downfall for his great House Tyrell, as he is the only heir, and without him, his family line will perish. It is evident in this scene that he is traumatized by the High Sparrow and forced to renounce his identity and inheritance:

> Loras Tyrell: I will abandon my Tyrell name and all that goes with it. I will renounce my lordship and my claims on Highgarden (crowd murmuring, gasps). I will never marry and I will never father children (crying). (S6:E10, unit 7)

Trauma can have a devastating impact on a person's sense of identity (Nadal and Calvo, 2014; Berman et al., 2020). In Loras's case, he may feel that his identity as a Tyrell is tainted or associated with painful memories, and therefore, he wishes to distance himself from it. This act can be seen as a way to cope with the trauma by disassociating himself from the source of his pain. As a nobleman, Loras likely has responsibilities and expectations tied to his position. Trauma can disrupt one's ability to fulfill these roles and obligations, leading to "feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness" (Lewis, 1992). By renouncing his lordship and claims, Loras may be attempting to relinquish the pressures and burdens that come with his status, seeking a sense of freedom from the expectations placed upon him.

Trauma can also deeply affect one's ability to form and maintain relationships (Goff et al., 2006). Loras fears that his trauma will negatively impact any potential partner or children, or he may feel incapable of providing the love and care they deserve due to his homosexuality. This declaration reflects a sense of hopelessness or resignation regarding his future and his ability to experience intimacy. The emotional intensity of Loras's statement and the reactions of those around him highlight the profound impact of trauma on both the individual and their community (Kaniasty and Norris, 2013). Trauma often evokes strong emotions such as sadness, fear, and sympathy. The reaction of the crowd suggests that Loras's declaration is unexpected and deeply affecting, indicating the significance of his decision in the context of his personal experiences and the wider social context.

Overall, Loras Tyrell's statement encapsulates the complex ways in which trauma can shape an individual's identity, relationships, and future aspirations, in this case, his homosexuality. It reflects a profound sense of loss, despair, and the struggle to find a sense of agency and meaning in the aftermath of traumatic experiences (Ramos and Leal, 2013).

5 Discussion

The representation of homosexuality in *Game of Thrones* is a nuanced and complex portrayal within the broader context of gender, power, and societal norms. This analysis synthesizes the primary findings from the study, placing them within the existing literature and emphasizing the implications for LGBTQ+ representation in popular media. *Game of Thrones* operates within a deeply heteronormative framework, where traditional gender roles and heterosexual relationships are the norm. This framework significantly influences the portrayal of homosexual characters and their relationships. The series often intertwines homosexual relationships with political intrigue and power struggles, as exemplified in the relationship between Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell. Although their relationship is genuine, it is also instrumentalized within the larger narrative of power dynamics and political alliances, reflecting Clapton and Shepherd's (2017)

analysis of gendered political authority in the series, where personal relationships are often subordinated to larger political ambitions. The study reveals that *Game of Thrones* frequently uses derogatory language to refer to homosexual characters, framing them as 'degenerates'. This choice of language, laden with negative connotations, reinforces societal prejudices and homophobic attitudes. The use of such language reflects the medieval setting of the series, where concepts of sexuality are not as nuanced as in contemporary times. Characters like Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell are often depicted as morally corrupt or socially undesirable due to their homosexuality, echoing historical attitudes toward non-heteronormative identities (Johansson and Percy, 2009).

The series also delves into the intersection of homosexuality and trauma, particularly through the character of Loras Tyrell. Loras's experiences shed light on how trauma can influence one's identity and relationships. His fears of being unable to express love and care due to his homosexuality underline the profound impact of societal rejection and internalized homophobia. This portrayal resonates with the research of Berman et al. (2020), who examine the interconnectedness of trauma and identity.

While *Game of Thrones* shines a spotlight on the hardships faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, it also runs the risk of sensationalizing trauma for dramatic effect. The graphic and often brutal depiction of homosexual characters could desensitize viewers to the real struggles of these communities. This sensationalism raises concerns about the potential for such representations to diminish the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, rather than fostering empathy and understanding. This critique is consistent with the broader discourse on the ethical obligations of media in depicting marginalized groups (Sandqvist, 2012; Laurie, 2015).

5.1 Implications

The depiction of Renly and Loras' relationship in *Game of Thrones* serves as a poignant reflection of the harsh realities of their world. As their love story becomes intertwined with the political intrigue of the series, it ultimately leads to tragic consequences for both characters. This portrayal serves as a powerful reminder of the challenges and injustices faced by marginalized communities in society, emphasizing the need for greater diversity and inclusivity in popular media. It is important to further examine the broader societal impact of *Game of Thrones*' representation of homosexuality, as the show sheds light on the discrimination and violence faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the potential of the show to sensationalize trauma for shock value, which may desensitize viewers to the real-life struggles of these communities.

5.2 Limitations and future directions

The paper acknowledges that there is limited research on queer studies regarding the *Game of Thrones* series, which could indicate a gap in the existing literature. The study mainly focuses on the representation of homosexuality in the show, but it may not cover other aspects or themes of LGBTQ+ representation in depth. Additionally, the paper does not provide a thorough exploration of the historical context of homosexuality in the show or its implications for society, which could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. For future directions, the research could be done by investigating the potential impact of sensationalizing trauma in the show on viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward real-life struggles faced by LGBTQ+ communities, and addressing criticisms and improving their representation in similar media in the future by implementing strategies that promote responsible and inclusive representation.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the patients/participants or patients/participants' legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

GL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GC: Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Please don't gayify!: an autoethnographic account of medicalised relationality for LGBTQI+ safe affirming medical health education and clinical practice

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In this article, the authors, a cis-gender gay man and an Indigenous non-binary, two-spirit person, narrate their past encounters with health professionals and their experiences pursuing allied health care training as students. Taking an autoethnographic approach, the first author re-narrates how medical practitioners and students engage (or fail to engage) with the LGBTQIA+ community. They draw on gray documentation derived from an interaction with a consulting physician that highlighted a telling lack of knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community, including those with diverse sex characteristics and sexualities/manifesting as unconscious bias. This interaction provided the impetus to speak back to the experience of being reduced to a medical prognosis. The second author questions the hegemonic practices underpinning encounters with the medical model of response in tertiary education. Our remit in this paper is to question how adequately the specific needs of the LGBTQI+ population are being addressed by the medical model and to what extent aspiring clinicians understand how their actions can contribute to gender- and sexuality-based discrimination and stigmatization.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ+, health care, heteropatriarchy, misgendering, autoethnography, medical model

Introduction: leave your body at the door

In this article, we draw from our lived experience to articulate how the intersectionalities within LGBTQI+ communities are often neglected in allied health professionals' education and clinical practice. Valentine (2007) has noted that the constantly changing complexities of negotiating intersectionality require an awareness of how the LGBTQI+ population is constituted across a wide spectrum of cultural identities, genders, religions, ethnicities, impairments, ages, and disabilities. This article, with a particular focus on the Australian context, examines prejudice in medical healthcare education and clinical practice. As we reflect on the material and situational structures of our lived experiences, which visibly express our queer positionalities, we address the issues within healthcare domains. Too often, encounters and interactions with the medical profession make queer individuals feel like unwanted guests at a dinner party.

Fear of prejudice is already known to impact the numbers of LGBTQI+ community members seeking healthcare provision (Asztalos et al., 2009; Olson et al., 2016; Abreu et al., 2022).

It has been claimed that health outcomes for LGBTQI+ individuals are poorer in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts (Poteat et al., 2021). In the state of Victoria, Australia, alarming statistics have been published that indicate that the healthcare system is failing LGBTQI+ community members in all areas (Gil et al., 2021).

A study by Stewart and O'Reilly (2017) showed that in aged care, transgender and non-binary adults were victims of continuous misgendering, inappropriate comments, abuse, and deadnaming. Copeland et al., 2023, in "Creating Change with Families: Reflections and Recommendations for the Care of Gender Diverse and LGBTQIA+ Individuals and Their Families Throughout Pregnancy and Birth," referenced two separate members of the queer community (one who identified as trans and the other as non-binary) who expressed their fear of misgendering. Russ (2018) noted the harmful effects of "under the breath" comments from midwives when assisting LGBTQI+ individuals. Considering the increase in what Nash and Browne (2020) coined as heteroactivism, a reinvigorated global opposition to LGBTQ+ equalities and rights, this article aims to reconsider how LGBTQI+ inclusion can be better integrated into the allied health landscape and clinical practice.

The shame of being/becoming the other within the quotidian discourses of medicalized relationality provoked us the following wonder. How is it that the LGBTQ+ body continues to be habitually inscribed by epistemic practices that fail to acknowledge the experiential intersections of ethnicity, cisgender, class, sexual identity, social background, age, and visible and non-visible impairments? As we started to question how adequately the tertiary healthcare curriculum addresses the specific needs of the LGBTQI+ population, our focus shifted to how aspiring clinicians understand the routine experiences of discrimination and stigmatization encountered by LGBTQI+ individuals. What barriers prevent the provision of safe and affirming care to LGBTQI+ clients? Does it always have to be us that has to be deconstructed?

To think differently about these questions is to think with agency and resist the tragic trope. It is to affirm that experiences arising from embodiment are critical to a range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Too often, we have to engage in self-translation that requires a confessional narrative of trans, gay, and genderqueer personhood; we suggest this should not only be understood as a psychological phenomenon but also as a sociological occurrence. We call for rescripting healthcare education and practices that move beyond dualist thinking. This consultative approach should involve a somatic reorientation of fluidity, liminality, and abjection as a performative signifier of existence.

This often requires health practitioners to possess an understanding of the ever-evolving ecology of multifaceted coded meanings that exist within LGBTQI+ communities, which requires constant review, reconsideration, and re/textualization.

Not another autoethnography? Do you really want to know me? Do you really care?

We acknowledge that our bodies and hearts carry trauma and weariness from daily struggles for survival and self-care, but they also carry defiant dreams. For us, autoethnography must necessarily be a generative and enabling frame for exploring the possibilities borne of our defiant dreams (Bell et al., 2020, p. 851).

When a narrative is entrenched, disruption and provocation are required. Reflecting on our lived experiences, we (re)construct our quotidian experience of the doxa of dis/connections and signpost for the reader that in our reconstructed accounts, we do not separate what we know from how we know (Ahmed, 2006; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010).

Our autoethnographic approach examines complex medical infrastructure, and Kincheloe (2004) has likened autoethnography to a form of critical pedagogy in its commitment to transformative and emancipatory processes. In its pursuit of situated understandings, autoethnographic accounts can elucidate how self-construction emerges from a set of relationships.

Thus, in an ontological context, meaning emerges not from the thing itself but from its relationships to an infinite number of things. Furthermore, autoethnography has the potential to capture the passion, feelings, and struggles of personal experiences on the page (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

Researchers bring various experiences, scholarship, and theoretical and practical understandings to research. Epistemological considerations are not abstractions, and autoethnographic accounts that have addressed diverse genders and sexualities have framed how being visibly LGBTQ+ in medical domains can mean becoming subject to the ideological and performative functionality of the default assumption of heteronormativity (Speciale et al., 2015; Popova, 2017; Ozalas, 2020; Suárez, 2022; Johnson et al., 2024).

Storying as autopoiesis: a counter-hegemonic tactic

In the end, we all become stories—Margaret Atwood.

Human action is inherently interpretive, as all actions carry meaning and intention, existing within a social and cultural context that further attaches meanings to them. Any attempts to interpret these actions and events must reference their already-interpreted nature, as well as the background of intention and conventional understandings, which must also be reinterpreted.

Critically reflecting on his experience(s), Author 1, who identifies as a cis-gender gay male, recounts an accident of being admitted to an emergency with a suspected case of viral meningitis. He acknowledges that he does not conform to normative masculinity and is acutely aware of how he is perceived by the disciplinary imagination of the straight social world. Through an epistemology of proximity, he re-stories a narrative of psychological, physical, and psychic dis/ese, illustrating how being

is always subject to ideological and performative functions and how heteronormativity is privileged by default.

I remember little of my ambulance admission to A&E for suspected meningitis but I do remember the aging White, male, assumed heterosexual ***treating physician insisting I complete a questionnaire that inquired of activities associated with non-heterosexual sexual orientations****. I have cut and pasted sections from a letter that was written by the physician on my release from hospital and unknowingly to me was sent to my Dean for processing on to Human Resources as I was due to fly overseas for work in the following 3 days and my University requested assurance for insurance purposes that I was well enough to travel.*

22 May 2014

Dear Richard

Re: Dr Mark Vicars

Dr Mark Vicars was admitted to Geelong hospital under my care on Wednesday, 21 May. Last Thursday when he returned home from work at about 9 PM, he felt hot and sweaty, approximately 5 min later he developed the sudden onset of a severe headache over the vertex and down the side of the head bilaterally but not frontal or occipital. The headache was 10/1 0 severity. He felt febrile over the next few days, and on a Saturday he developed nausea and vomiting, he was photophobic, he didn't experience phonophobia because there was no noise where he lives. There were no visual or neurological symptoms. His friend forced him to come to the hospital when she rang an ambulance on the Wednesday, he simply lay in bed for the 4 days, there was some neck stiffness. He has a past history of insulin-dependent diabetes approximately 9 years, glaucoma and coronary artery disease. His full blood examination and CRP were both normal. He is a lecturer at Victoria University, he smokes 20–25 cigarettes per day, drinks alcohol, does not use intravenous drugs but is at risk of HIV because of his homosexuality in the setting of not.

I think he most likely had a viral meningitis, the rigor preceding the headache and the focal nature the headache would mitigate against the diagnosis of a subarachnoid hemorrhage. Sometimes with viral meningitis one can see the sudden onset of a severe headache. I did suggest however that at some stage he probably should have a HIV test although I think this is unlikely to have been HIV infection, it is recommended that HIV tests should be done on a regular basis. The purpose of this letter is for you to keep it and use it in future consultations with other Doctors. This letter represents what I understood from your recent consultation. Could I suggest that it would be a good idea if the patient carried this letter with him when he travels as this would greatly assist any Doctors he might would need to see.

Regards

Professor bmbmbmb

I am forever grateful that the letter was intercepted and "lost" by my Dean at the time, preventing it from reaching Human Resources and being added to my personal employment file. Since 2014, I have kept the letter, unsure of what to do with it. Now, I interpret it as an example of institutional sacred textualities that shape and inform performative narratives around identity, power, and social being. I have come to understand that clinical practice often privileges dominant ideologies, embedding them as routine regulatory practices of subjectification. Each time I read and re-read that letter, it highlights the absence of LGBTQ+ sensitivity exhibited by the attending physician during my hospital admission.

Praxis makes perfect: LGBTQI+ inclusive practice in healthcare settings

Reflecting on the experiences of the second author, an Indigenous non-binary, two-spirit, person, and a student in Allied health education, we see a vivid illustration of the paralysis encountered when formal curriculum content dedicated to LGBTQI+ people is absent. The second author aimed to educate fellow students that, at some point in their careers, they would likely encounter individuals who are transitioning and need to know how to communicate effectively with pre-op or post-op patients. This involves understanding the psychological assessment required for trans, non-binary, and gender-fluid communities.

When the second author decided to incorporate more LGBTQI+ inclusive content into group presentations and case studies, altering statistics and medication regimens to reflect individuals in various stages of transitioning, they faced significant pushback. Classmates frequently asked, "Why are you making the content gay?" or, in one instance, "Please don't gayify the presentation," in a course that offered few formal learning opportunities to prepare students to work with LGBTQI+ clients.

Critically reflecting on Zir's experience as a healthcare student, they highlighted the frequent misconceptions and contradictions related to LGBTQI+ individuals among staff and students. They suggested that the tools for understanding are lacking in clinical settings due to the absence of relevant education or support (Block, 2014). This lack of education, they argued, begins in tertiary educational settings and can easily flow into clinical practice, where bi-gender markers remain the default.

The second author notes that without essential education on how to interact with minority groups and using correct nomenclature when assessing or interacting with gender-diverse or LGBT patients, LGBTQ+ individuals will likely remain in a state of mental exhaustion. They argued that allied health education at a tertiary level is not gender-queer inclusive. Only when specialists work in facilities with LGBTQ+ inclusive practices will they receive the necessary training to assess clients properly.

At a tertiary level, the allied healthcare curriculum can be actively criticized for its lack of LGBTQ+ inclusivity and diversity. For example, most medical textbooks feature pictures of white cis men and women, perpetuating systemic binary gender norms (Kirjava et al., 2023).

To be or not to be out: that is the question

Chapman et al.'s (2012) study found that parents in a homosexual relationship often choose not to disclose their orientation to health professionals due to fear that their children might not receive proper care. Table et al. (2022) highlighted

a lack of compassion for individuals identifying outside binary norms. Additionally, Roth et al. (2020) developed a course for 4th-year medical students examining their readiness for residency. Many students reported a clear lack of training dedicated to LGBTQI+ healthcare; when training was available, it was often incorporated into existing modules without significant professional impact.

To ensure that stories like ours are not continuously repeated, it is essential for more LGBTQ+ individuals to report their encounters. Data can foster change and enable the recovery of "excluded subjects" within and through discourses that promote the values of normativity (Tamboukou and Ball, 2003, p. 5).

Data serve as an ontological-ethical-epistemic space from which to reconsider forms of public knowledge-making and argumentation (Vicars and Arantes, 2023). In the 1980′s, it was not until the Centre for Disease Control in America began recording data on "innocent victims" that the political implications of HIV+ were acknowledged, leading to greater scrutiny of how new cases were counted. The resulting data categorized belonging, which subsequently funded medical research and designated HIV+ as an LGBTQ+ issue, with the LGBTQ+ community orchestrating responses to the increasing rates of infection.

The free-floating signifier of the rainbow flag, designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978, became a symbol of pride and defiance. This was further augmented in 1987 with the creation of the NAMES Project: the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which announced to the world: "we're here, we're queer, and we're dying." The quilt, consisting of 48,000 panels, covers three acres of land when unfolded. It visually represents the effects of HIV and has become a powerful queer political symbol and form of data that continues to be sustained by the community.

At the most basic level, allowing the smallest signifier, such as a rainbow flag or an ally sign, gives someone entering a clinical setting a sense of security. It signals that the space is a safe environment for the LGBTQ+ community and that it is okay to reveal a part of their identity. The second author notes how these signs can create an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding. These are his remarks:

> *During one of my placement I found myself drawn to the physiotherapist who wore pronoun pins and ally socks. Seeing these signifiers gave me the permission to be more myself. I was able to engage more and more because I didn't have a continuous anxiety of anticipating homophobic comments.*

Disappointments and dissonance…That can't be the only story!

The RACGP[1] reports that 65.5% of those who identify as LGBTQI+ do not have a regular GP due to fears of not receiving proper care. Muntinga et al. (2015) conducted a study evaluating biomedical and sociocultural aspects of diversity and found that learning objectives in medical knowledge, skill, patient–practitioner communication, and reflexivity were somewhat lacking.

Wilby et al. (2022) noted the need to dismantle systemic discrimination in areas such as pharmacy education and practice. In critiquing the medical discourses in our lived experience, the second author observed that when students would complain or question why they were "gayifying" the presentation, the real "problem" was how the allied health curriculum was informed by and connected to wider social, cultural, and historical heteronorming forces.

The psychosocial risk of healthcare policy and practice for LGBTQ+ communities in clinical healthcare can become riddled with affective relations connected to intrinsic views of selfhood, self-esteem, efficacy, and agency (Foucault, 1994).

Limitations

We suggest there is a cultural need for greater gender and sexual orientation training for allied health professionals and in clinical practice. However, how can this be accomplished when it is not a priority for educational institutions or accreditation organizations? By synergizing an *a posteriori* knowledge of heteronormative practices in tertiary educational and clinical domains, we can address how specific phenomena are explored in temporal and spatial settings that we claim remain under investigated. Our encounters with the medical model and discourse have taught us how the body, for LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, can be a site of betrayal. In our reconstructed account, we hope the verisimilitude and legitimacy of our experience may connect with first-hand familiarity.

The vignette in this article required us to "transform lived experience into a textual expression that is not a reflective re-living and a reflective re-appropriation of something meaningful" (van Manen, 2016, p. 36). While Adams (2015) recognize that stories shift with "time, space, and context" (95), Sikes and Goodson (2017) declare that "it is through the [re]construction, telling, and retelling of personal stories, to ourselves and to others, that we attempt to make sense of our lives and give them meaning" (61). Some memories come easily: words, sentences, and paragraphs render them sculpturesque. Others come fragmented and incomplete, necessitating time and patience for the sediments of silence to conglomerate together in recollection.

In what is not so much a conclusion but a call for an interruption in binary teleological embodied scripting, we invite a transformation of healthcare education and practices that move beyond dualist thinking. We advocate for healthcare approaches that reorient away from gender and sexual fluidity, liminality, and abjection as performative signifiers of existence. By introducing mandatory education that is relevant to LGBTQI+ lives, we may stop searching for signs in hospitals, clinics, and healthcare education that indicate it is safe to be ourselves.

1 RACG. (2021). Available at: https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/lgbtqia-youth-more-likely-to-seek-mental-support.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Approval to conduct this research was provided by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC).

Author contributions

MV: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MD: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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A needs-assessment survey of the high school LGBTQ+ environment by a health science center interprofessional team

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Despite improvements in the awareness and acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender diverse (LGBTQ+) individuals, the LGBTQ+ community continues to experience discrimination, which can result in adverse health outcomes. In particular, LGBTQ+ youth have an increased risk of experiencing depression, substance abuse, and suicide. Societal stigma and rejection, bullying, and familial disapproval all contribute to these health disparities. In recognition of these inequities, an interprofessional team of biomedical faculty members, staff, and trainees from the Louisiana State University Health Science Center (LSUHSC) in New Orleans developed the needs-assessment evaluation, the Gender and Sexual Minority Youth Outreach Survey (GSMYO) for high school students. Health science centers have access to resources and experienced personnel who can provide support and education to high school students, teachers, and administrative staff. However, it is important to first determine the high schools' specific needs, attitudes towards LGBTQ+ acceptance, and their current resources. Faculty, staff, and trainees from the LSUHSC Science Youth Initiative (SYI) and the LSUHSC LGBTQ+ Organization, Tiger Pride, administered the short, anonymous survey to adolescents attending Southeast Louisiana high schools. English Language Learner (ELL) students received the survey in Spanish. Results from the GSMYO needs-assessment survey are presented. Other health science centers may adapt the presented survey to develop needs-based LGBTQ+ high school programs to address the educational and health inequities in their own communities, regardless of location or demographic region.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ+, LGBTQ+ advocacy, LGBTQ+ school environment, high school, outreach, LGBTQ+ mental health, school health, adolescent health

1 Introduction

The National Institutes of Health officially recently designated lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual and gender diverse (LGBTQ+) individuals as a health disparity population (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute & National Institutes of Health, 2014; Dankwa-Mullan and Pérez-Stable, 2016; Eliscu et al., 2023). Compared to heterosexual and gender binary peers, LGBTQ+ individuals are more than 2.5 times more likely to experience anxiety, depression, higher rates of suicidal thoughts, negative health behaviors (e.g., alcohol and tobacco use, physical inactivity, obesity), and sexually transmitted infections (Cochran et al., 2003; Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities, and Board of the Health of Select Populations, 2011; Buchting et al., 2018; Shover et al., 2018; Herman et al., 2019; Eliscu et al., 2023). Recent reports state that 81% of transgender adults in the U.S. have thought about suicide, 42% of transgender adults have attempted it, and 56% have engaged in non-suicidal self-injury over their lifetimes (Kidd et al., 2023).

LGBTQ+ youth, in particular, face discrimination, harassment, family & social rejection, or violence, which lead to an increased risk of depression, substance abuse, and suicide (McConnell et al., 2015; Mustanski et al., 2015; Gonzales and Rendon-Garcia, 2016; Hatzenbuehler and Pachankis, 2016; Gonzales and Henning-Smith, 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center, 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) monitors health among 9th through 12th grade students in the U.S. (Kann et al., 2018; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The YRBSS reports that 69% of LGBQ+ youth feel persistently depressed and hopeless, compared to 35% of heterosexual youth (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Szucs et al., 2022). LGBQ+ youth consistently report higher rates of bullying, being threatened or injured with a weapon, and dating violence (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Szucs et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBQ+ students were four times more likely to attempt suicide, and 20% of LGBQ+ students said they had been physically abused by a parent or other adult at home compared to 10% of heterosexual students (Szucs et al., 2022). Data indicate that 82% of transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide, compared to the U.S. frequencies of 12.1 and 4.1%, respectively (Grossman et al., 2016; Austin et al., 2022).

Research shows that students who feel supported by their school community do better socially, emotionally, and academically (Ybarra et al., 2015; Gegenfurtner and Gebhardt, 2017; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2019). When schools implement LGBTQ+-supportive policies and practices, all students experience less emotional distress, violence, harassment, and suicidal behaviors (Gegenfurtner and Gebhardt, 2017; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Lessard et al., 2020; Kaczkowski et al., 2022). The CDC's "What Works in Schools" program has identified inclusive practices that benefit both LGBTQ+ students and their heterosexual peers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). However, some schools are resistant to these implementations, so students may not have allies or adults they can trust (Kaczkowski et al., 2022; Shattuck et al., 2022). In fact, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to miss school because of safety concerns (Gegenfurtner and Gebhardt, 2017; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Szucs et al., 2022). Studies recommend training of teachers, counselors, social workers, and mental health practitioners to systematically incorporate knowledge and evidence-based practices to enable them to become culturally and clinically skilled in working with LGBTQ+ and TGNC youth and their families (Grossman et al., 2016; Gegenfurtner and Gebhardt, 2017; Phelan et al., 2017).

Since the NIH designated LGBTQ+ as a health disparity population, health care organizations and academic institutions have created guidelines to reduce these inequalities (Dankwa-Mullan and Pérez-Stable, 2016; Phelan et al., 2017; Rafferty and AAP Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, AAP Committee on Adolescence, AAP Section on Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, and Transgender Health and Wellness, 2018; Cronin and Stockdale, 2021; American Academy of Family Physicians, 2023; Eliscu et al., 2023). The Liaison Committee on Medical Education now includes community service opportunities in their accreditation guidelines, and many graduate programs in the biomedical sciences and public health incorporate service learning as part of their curriculum (Woodhouse et al., 2006; Sabo et al., 2015; Loh et al., 2016; Phelan et al., 2017; Abraham and Torner, 2021). Studies describe a dramatic shift in the medical school curriculum to reduce medical student biases toward LGBTQ+ individuals by increasing opportunities to provide care to sexual minorities, an improved diversity climate, and more favorable interaction with sexual minorities (Phelan et al., 2017). These programs provide valuable opportunities for trainees in health care professions, biomedical research, and public health to strengthen community-campus partnerships and address health disparities in vulnerable populations (Seifer, 1998; Blue et al., 2006; Woodhouse et al., 2006; Sheridan et al., 2010; Brazeau et al., 2011; Sabo et al., 2015; Loh et al., 2016; Phelan et al., 2017; Abraham and Torner, 2021).

The goal of the present study is to conduct a needs-assessment among high school students residing in Southeastern Louisiana. Results of the survey will be used to develop needs-based LGBTQ+ health equity initiatives that improve LGBTQ+ education, improve training of emerging health care and public health professionals, increase accessibility to preventative health services, and reduce LGBTQ+ health disparities.

2 The interprofessional team

The Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center (LSUHSC) in New Orleans, LA is comprised of six schools (Medicine, Graduate Studies, Public Health, Nursing, Allied Health Professions, and Dentistry). In keeping with national guidelines, LSUHSC provides health education service learning to high schools while allowing future health care professionals and academic trainees to develop a sense of commitment to their communities (Gunaldo et al., 2018, 2020). For more than 20 years, LSUHSC in New Orleans has received federal, local, and foundational funding to support educational pipeline/pathway programs including the Science Youth Initiative (SYI) (Erickson et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2022; Hess et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2024). During the academic year (August–May), an interprofessional team of LSUHSC faculty, staff, and trainees teach high school students via practical experiments to enhance their science curriculum, improve classroom/standardized test scores, and provide career guidance. The curricula were developed in partnership with teachers from more than 50 schools throughout Southeastern Louisiana. Anonymous formative and summative evaluations by participants have measured satisfaction of the program, demographics, learning gains, topic retention, and long-term tracking of career plans (Erickson et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2022; Hess et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2024).

All LSUHSC faculty, trainees, and staff are required to complete yearly online training covering how to prevent harassment and discrimination. These topics are reinforced during in-person training which includes workshops on microaggressions, implicit bias, and SafeZone Training (Bolger and Killerman, 2018; Harrison-Bernard et al., 2020; Shattuck et al., 2022). SafeZone Training develops, enhances and maintains safe environments in workplaces, schools and other social settings that support LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as straight, cisgender people (Bolger and Killerman, 2018; Harrison-Bernard et al., 2020; Shattuck et al., 2022). Workshops include videos, seminars, interactive activities, and panel discussions, and are facilitated by diversity education experts at the institutional, state, and national level. Additionally, all LSUHSC adults teaching students under the age of 18 require a criminal background check, fingerprinting, and the completion of an online training module by the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services.

3 The gender and sexual minority youth outreach survey

To find out how to help our communities, it was first necessary to evaluate the needs of individual high schools and to determine whether these needs varied depending on the location, nature, and composition of the student population. Therefore, faculty directors of the SYI created the Gender and Sexual Minority Youth Outreach Survey (GSMYOS), modeled after the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) high school questionnaire, (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center, 2021). The GSMYOS is a short, simple, anonymous survey asking adolescents to rate their high school's attitudes towards LGBTQ+ acceptance and available resources with the overall goal of developing needs-based educational and support programs led by health care professional trainees and faculty for LGBTQ+ youth. The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board and all participants had parent/guardian consent.

3.1 Survey administration

Data were collected from SYI workshop participants enrolled in high schools from Southeastern Louisiana including public (ELL and non-ELL) and private (Catholic and non-Catholic) schools in urban and suburban regions of a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and racial and ethnic groups. LSUHSC facilitators supervised the in-person survey, in which students seated themselves separately from their peers to ensure privacy. Upon completion, surveys were collected in an envelope to maintain anonymity. Students were informed that the survey was completely anonymous and voluntary and that a blank (incomplete) survey form would be accepted. Adolescents enrolled in English Language Learner (ELL) programs whose first language was Spanish received the survey translated to their native language.

3.2 Analysis

The data were analyzed using the following methods: For questions using a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5), the data were grouped according to school type (private Catholic, private non-Catholic, public), if students were enrolled in an ELL program, and by school location (suburban, urban). Mean and standard error were computed for each category, and a two-sample t-test was used to determine significance in answers based on school type and school location. A significance threshold was set at $\alpha = 0.05$. Since the responses for Statement 2 were not on a scale; responses were analyzed using a Chi-Square test. Significance threshold was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

3.3 Demographics

A total of 516 high school students were surveyed from seven different schools; one urban school had both ELL and non-ELL students, but their results were analyzed separately. The demographics regarding race varied, ranging from private Catholic schools with a predominantly White student body to public schools with a more racially diverse population (Figure 1). Furthermore, higher levels of diversity were observed in urban schools relative to suburban schools.

3.4 Survey question results

3.4.1 Question 1: I feel that my campus is an LGBTQ+-friendly environment

Survey question results are summarized in Table 1. Responses to this statement varied significantly by school type:

a Private non-Catholic schools ($n = 110$) and non-ELL public schools ($n = 180$) agreed (53.2, 35% respectively). Using the Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 5) their means were similar, 3.78 and 3.88, respectively ($p = 1.97$).
b Students from private Catholic schools ($n = 162$) were the most likely to disagree (36.6%) with this statement. The average response from students in this category (2.6) is significantly lowest, indicating that students in private Catholic schools do not consider their school as LGBTQ+-friendly.
c The majority of ELL students attending public Schools (public ELL) chose neutral (35.9%), with a mean of 3.39.
d All schools' means were significantly higher than private Catholic schools.

Significant differences were seen based on location:

a Although the majority of students from all tested locations agreed that their school was LGBTQ+ friendly (suburban, urban non-ELL, and urban ELL student average scores were 3.09, 4.08, and 3.39, respectively).
b Urban non-ELL students ($n = 205$) were most likely to strongly agree (43.6%).
c The majority of the students in suburban and urban ELL remained neutral.

3.4.2 Question 2: Do you personally know someone who openly identifies as LGBTQ+?

a The vast majority of non-ELL public school, private Catholic school, and private non-Catholic school students (92.8, 91.3, and

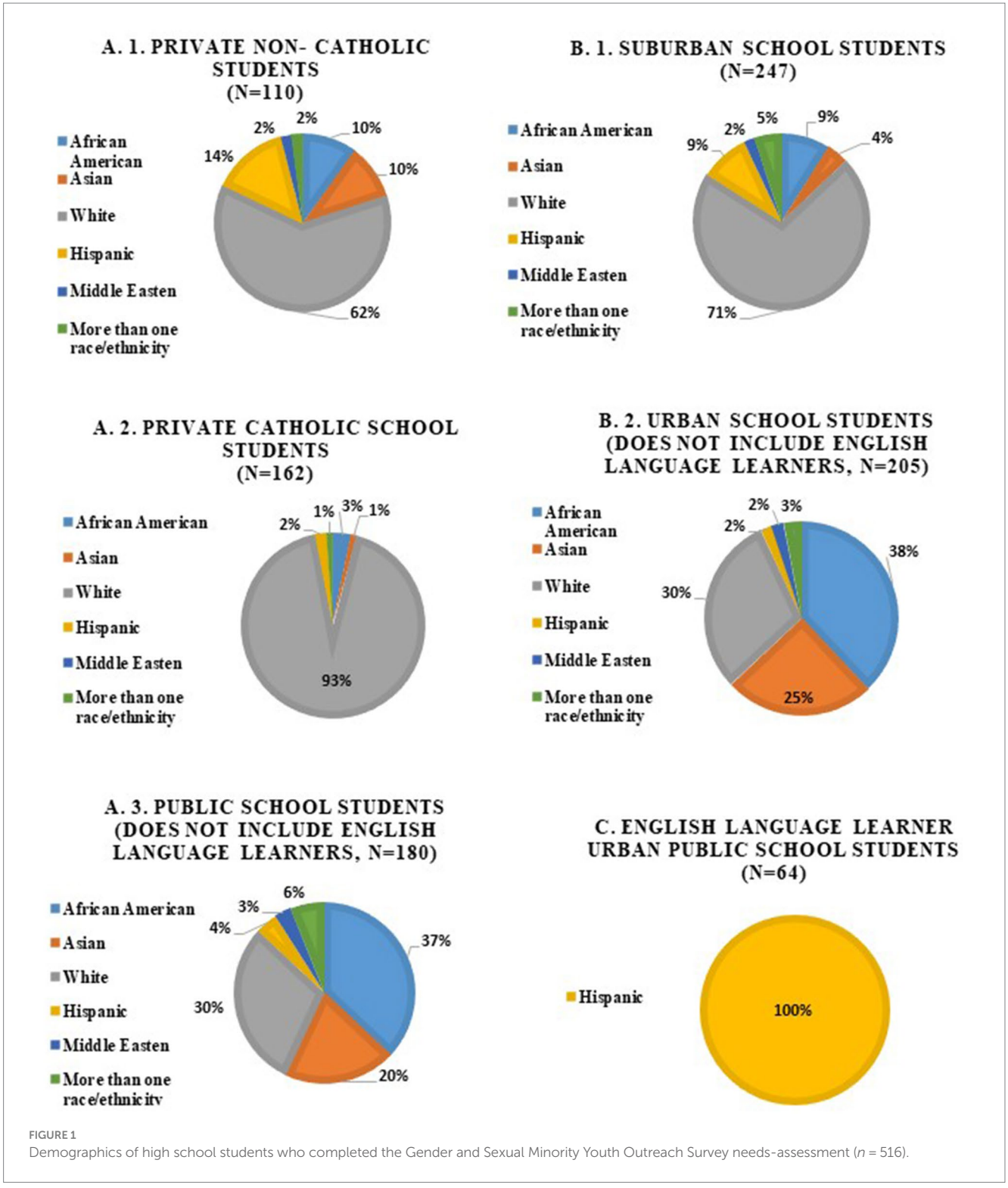

FIGURE 1
Demographics of high school students who completed the Gender and Sexual Minority Youth Outreach Survey needs-assessment (n = 516).

90.8%) or suburban and non-ELL urban (95.0 and 90.4%) answered that they knew someone who openly identified as LGBTQ+.

b However, the answers of public ELL students were significantly different from other student types. The majority of ELL students reported that they did not know someone who identified as LGBTQ+ (42.2%).

3.4.3 Statement 3: I have witnessed bullying (verbal, physical, online, etc.) of classmates openly identified or perceived to be LGBTQ+

We observed no statistical difference in the response of students by school type:

a Average responses ranged from 2.6 to 2.8.

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TABLE 1 Summary of high school student responses to the Gender and Sexual Minority Youth Outreach needs-assessment survey.

Statement 1: I feel that my school is an LGBTQ+ friendly environment.								
Percentages by school type					Percentages by school location			
Likert scale	Private Non-Catholic (n = 110)	Private Catholic (n = 162)	Public Non-ELL (n = 180)	Public ELL (n = 64)	Likert scale	Suburban (n = 247)	Urban Non-ELL (n = 205)	Urban ELL (n = 64)
Strongly disagree (1)	2.8%	9.3%	5.0%	6.3%	Strongly disagree (1)	6.8%	4.3%	6.3%
Disagree (2)	2.8%	36.6%	6.1%	12.5%	Disagree (2)	21.6%	4.3%	12.5%
Neutral (3)	22.9%	40.4%	18.9%	35.9%	Neutral (3)	33.9%	13.6%	**35.9%**
Agree (4)	53.2%	10.6%	35.0%	26.6%	Agree (4)	29.0%	34.3%	26.6%
Strongly agree (5)	18.3%	3.1%	35.0%	18.8%	Strongly agree (5)	8.7%	43.6%	18.8%

Statement 2: I personally know someone who identifies as LGBTQ+.								
Percentages by school type					Percentages by school location			
Likert scale	Private Non-Catholic	Private Catholic	Public Non-ELL	Public ELL	Likert scale	Suburban	Urban Non-ELL	Urban ELL
Yes (1)	90.8%	91.4%	92.8%	34.4%	Yes (1)	90.4%	95.0%	34.4%
No (2)	1.8%	6.8%	2.8%	42.2%	No (2)	4.8%	2.1%	42.2%
I do not know (3)	7.3%	1.9%	3.9%	18.8%	I do not know (3)	4.8%	2.1%	18.8%
Do not care to respond (4)	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	4.7%	Do not care to respond (4)	0.0%	0.7%	4.7%

Statement 3: I have witnessed bullying (verbal, physical, online, etc.) of classmates openly identified or perceived to be LGBTQ+.								
Percentages by school type					Percentages by school location			
Likert scale	Private Non-Catholic	Private Catholic	Public Non-ELL	Public ELL	Likert scale	Suburban	Urban Non-ELL	Urban ELL
Strongly disagree (1)	14.5%	11.1%	15.0%	15.9%	Strongly disagree (1)	11.9%	17.1%	15.9%
Disagree (2)	29.1%	30.2%	34.4%	28.6%	Disagree (2)	29.2%	37.1%	28.6%
Neutral (3)	20.9%	21.0%	20.0%	34.9%	Neutral (3)	21.5%	18.6%	34.9%
Agree (4)	34.5%	35.2%	26.7%	15.9%	Agree (4)	35.3%	23.6%	15.9%
Strongly agree (5)	0.9%	2.5%	3.9%	4.8%	Strongly agree (5)	2.2%	3.6%	4.8%

Statement 4: I have heard others in school speak about LGBTQ+ matters in a negative context asked students about bullying on their campuses.								
Percentages by school type					Percentages by school location			
Likert scale	Private Non-Catholic	Private, Catholic	Public Non-ELL	Public ELL	Likert scale	Suburban	Urban Non-ELL	Urban ELL
Strongly disagree (1)	5.5%	1.9%	10.6%	15.9%	Strongly disagree (1)	3.9%	11.4%	15.9%
Disagree (2)	3.7%	11.7%	15.0%	28.6%	Disagree (2)	8.4%	17.1%	28.6%
Neutral (3)	15.6%	18.5%	19.4%	34.9%	Neutral (3)	17.7%	19.3%	34.9%

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Statement 4: I have heard others in school speak about LGBTQ+ matters in a negative context asked students about bullying on their campuses.								
Percentages by school type					Percentages by school location			
Likert scale	Private Non-Catholic	Private, Catholic	Public Non-ELL	Public ELL	Likert scale	Suburban	Urban Non-ELL	Urban ELL
Agree (4)	49.5%	52.5%	45.0%	15.9%	Agree (4)	50.2%	45.7%	15.9%
Strongly agree (5)	25.7%	15.4%	10.0%	4.8%	Strongly agree (5)	19.9%	6.4%	4.8%

ELL, English Language Learner; Total number of student responses: $n = 516$.

b Public ELL students had a higher percentage of "neutral" responses (34.9%).

In contrast, statistically significant differences were found when the data were evaluated by location:

a A larger percentage of students from Suburban schools "agreed" or "strongly agreed" to have witnessed bullying (35.3%) than other locations.
b Non-ELL urban students reported the least amount of bullying relative to suburban students (non-ELL urban 17.1% strongly disagree, 37.1% disagree; suburban 11.9% strongly disagree, 29.9% disagree).
c Responses for urban ELL students also differed from suburban schools with the differences approaching statistical significance ($p = 0.06$).

3.4.4 Question 4: I have heard others in school speak about LGBTQ+ matters in a negative context

a Students from private non-Catholic schools and private Catholic schools had heard about LGBTQ+ matters in a negative context (with means of 3.8 and 3.7, respectively; and "agreed" or "strongly agreed" 75 and 67.9% respectively).
b In contrast, ELL students from public schools had the lowest mean out of all school types (2.7) and the highest percentage (44.5%) of students saying that they had not heard about LGBTQ+ matters being discussed in a negative context. The majority of ELL students stayed neutral (34.9%).
c These statistics are significantly different when compared to other school categories, and even differs from Non-ELL public school students, whose mean was 3.3.

When the responses for this statement were analyzed by location:

a Students from suburban schools had the highest average (3.7), followed by non-ELL urban (3.2) and then urban ELL students (2.6).
b Of note, the responses of suburban students were clustered at the "agree" (50.2%) and "strongly agree" (19.9%), with the majority of ELL students as staying neutral (34.9%).

4 Discussion

Our results provide insights into the environments that LGBTQ+ students encounter at their respective schools in Southeastern Louisiana. We found that schools in suburban areas, although equally as likely as their non-ELL urban counterparts to know an LGBTQ+ person, reported lower levels of LGBTQ+ friendliness in their school and higher levels of negative comments and bullying. This result indicates that although many suburban students are aware of LGBTQ+ individuals, there also exists higher levels of intolerance and hostility towards this population.

The responses of ELL students in public schools differed from non-ELL students. ELL students were unique in that they were less likely than their non-ELL counterparts to report that their school was LGBTQ+ friendly and less likely to know someone who identified as LGBTQ+. They reported, however, fewer incidents of negative remarks and witnessing bullying than non-ELL students. One possible explanation is that many ELL students are raised in cultures and environments in which discussion of LGBTQ+ issues are considered a taboo topic (Dumas, 2008; Witcher, 2014; Gray et al., 2015; Quidley-Rodriguez and Gattamorta, 2019). Furthermore, they may wish to assimilate, in which case their comments may reflect an attempt to fit into their new environment (Gray et al., 2015; Quidley-Rodriguez and Gattamorta, 2019). ELL educators often find themselves not only teaching language, but also American culture, so guidelines have been proposed to embed LGBTQ+ cultural lessons in their classroom environment (Dumas, 2008; Witcher, 2014). ELL teachers are recommended to reframe classroom discussions to include LGBTQ+ content, and in particular acceptance of transgender individuals (Dumas, 2008; Witcher, 2014; Grossman et al., 2016; Shariff-Marco et al., 2017).

Private non-Catholic and non-ELL public school students were the most likely to report that their school is LGBTQ+ friendly, while private Catholic school students were the least likely. Furthermore, while students from all school types were equally likely to have witnessed bullying, students from private Catholic schools and private non-Catholic schools were the most likely to have heard negative remarks about the LGBTQ+ community. According to scholars, the opportunities to include the LGBTQ+ community in Catholic education aligns with tenets of Catholic Social Teaching (the life and dignity of the person, the preference for the vulnerable, and the common good) (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005; Huchting and Fisher, 2019). However, a hostile climate exists for LGBTQ+ students, and the message of inclusion is contradicted when LGBTQ+ students experience

microaggressions (Huchting and Fisher, 2019; Janoski, 2023). Extensive research by Maher et al. demonstrates the connections between religiosity, masculinity, and intolerance in Catholic schools (Maher, 2007; Maher and Sever, 2007; Maher et al., 2008; Maher, 2013). Catholic secondary school staff and administrators' recommendations for promoting a more inclusive LGBTQ+ environment include (1) exposure to diverse perspectives and world views, (2) a "more personal, socially conscious, socially compassionate" learning environment, (3) professional development, (4) and the creation of ally and affinity groups (Maher, 2007; Maher and Sever, 2007; Maher et al., 2008; Maher, 2013; Callaghan, 2016; Huchting and Fisher, 2019; Parodi-Brown, 2019). Studies report that Catholic students are more accepting towards LGBTQ+ individuals when they had more personal experiences with them (Maher, 2007; Maher and Sever, 2007; Maher et al., 2008; Callegher, 2010; Callaghan, 2016; Huchting and Fisher, 2019). The Catholic Pastoral Committee on Sexual Minorities spearheaded the Safe Schools Initiative, based on a "training the trainer" model implemented in some U.S. Catholic schools (Bayly, 2013; Ratts et al., 2013).

5 Future directions

Our needs-assessment results provide valuable information for the development of health science center-led outreach programs to provide (1) education about LGBTQ+ issues to all high school students, (2) support for students who identify as LGBTQ+, and (3) service learning opportunities for health science center trainees. While all high schools would benefit from a centralized Core Curriculum, each school has its own unique environment that would require specific modules to address their individual needs. Therefore, based on our results, we propose supplementary modules targeting specific school environments. All of these would be led by health science center trainees, faculty, and staff. In addition, there are a variety of online resources that can aid in the development of the overarching program and modules including the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) Safe Space Kit (GLSEN, 2016), and the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (Stopbullying.gov, 2021). One limitation of this study includes the lack of sex or gender identity in our participants but will be included in the future.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by LSU School of Medicine Institutional Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

RV: Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. MM: Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. GS: Writing – review & editing. CN-R: Writing – review & editing. SN: Writing – review & editing. MC: Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. FT: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Toward promoting resilience of gender and sexually diverse youth in South African rural school ecologies

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Introduction: Gender and sexually diverse youth in schools experience exclusion, which detrimentally affects their ability to cope with the consequences of minority stress and may lead to absenteeism or dropout. The purpose of the study is to highlight a pressing need for inclusive policies and practices to aid in enabling LGBTQ+ learners in schools.

Methods: This paper explores how multiple systems intersect to promote a sense of inclusion and engagement within the school environment and impact the resilience of LGBTQ+ youth in a rural school setting. This paper presents findings from a qualitative interpretive phenomenological study with twelve purposively selected self-identifying LGBTQ+ youth residing in a rural South African community. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Results: This study shows the significance of teacher emotional support, addressing homophobic bullying, moving away from gender-based uniform prescriptions and designating some school bathrooms as gender-neutral to LGBTQ+ learners' resilience.

Conclusion: The findings of this study demonstrate how certain schools in rural settings employ innovative methods to support LGBTQ+ learners despite limited resources and the absence of comprehensive, inclusive policies on gender and sexually diverse learners. The findings have implications for LGBTQ+ learners in rural community schools worldwide. Future longitudinal studies could focus on how school ecologies inclusive of teachers, parents and the wider community can foster the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners, particularly in rural community contexts.

KEYWORDS

gender and sexual diversity, hetero-and cisnormativity, LGBTQ+ youth, multisystemic resilience, rural school settings

1 Introduction

The South African Human Rights Commission brought a case to court on 14 November 2016 involving Nare Mphela, a transgender woman from Ga-Matlala village in Limpopo Province in South Africa Nare case involves the harassment suffered by Nare from the school principal, Kgabo Francis Manamela. Manamela instructed other students to cease referring to Nare as "sister" and to subject her to harassment in the school restrooms. Additionally, she encouraged them to touch her genital area and investigate its contents. The principal also forbade her from singing hymns during the school assembly and would utilize physical punishment. After winning the court case, the Limpopo Department of Education in South Africa was instructed to compensate Mphela with

R60,000. This fee includes R20,000 for her psychological costs and an additional R20,000 to support her education completion (Botha, 2017). The Nare case and others exemplify the South African broader education system's lack of readiness and reluctance to implement inclusive education policies in rural schools effectively.

The draft guidelines on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in Public Schools, provided by the Western Cape Department, faced criticism from multiple institutions (Western Cape Government, 2020). The Equal Education Law Centre (2020, p. 3) states that the guidelines provided by the Western Cape Department of Education employ language such as "may," "it is recommended," or "it is encouraged," which diminishes the potential obligations and responsibilities of governing bodies and principals. This language reduces their role to mere recommendations and suggestions rather than directives. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the South African National Education Department to develop and enforce proactive policies that will support the resilience of LGBTQ+ students, particularly in high-risk environments like rural communities.

Presently, the South African Constitution, the South African Schools Act, and the inclusive education White Paper 6 are legal frameworks that safeguard the human rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. According to the Bill of Rights (Department of Education, 2001, p. 6), in Chapter 2, section 9(3) of the Republic of South Africa's constitution, it is prohibited from engaging in discriminatory practices based on gender, sex, or sexual orientation (Department of Justice, 1996). The South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) attempted to produce the draft guidelines regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) to address issues surrounding bullying, uniforms and gender-neutral bathrooms (DBE, 2022). However, the DBE 's attempts were opposed by several African Christian Rights organizations citing that they are godless and violate conservative Christian values (Francis and McEwen, 2023).

Furthermore, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 explicitly forbids discriminatory practices within educational institutions. White Paper 6 of 2001 defines inclusive education as a dynamic process that entails modifying attitudes, behavior, teaching methods, curricula, and environment to cater to all learners' requirements (Department of Education, 2001, p. 7). Ubisi (2021) expresses concerns about the lack of coherent inclusive school policies, which leads to uncertainties, omissions, and inconsistencies. These concerns allow school governing bodies, including single-sex, faith-based, or religiously conservative schools, to determine what they consider appropriate and whether to promote specific gender expressions and sexual orientations. Moreover, researchers, including Bhana (2014), Bhana and Mayeza (2016), and Francis and Kuhl (2020), have observed how the broader education macro system contributes to the continuation of compulsory hetero-cisnormativity by influencing school culture and policy. This means that policy reform to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ learners is an urgent need. Hetero cisnormativity is a worldwide phenomenon which is prevalent in rural communities. Discriminatory practices against LGBTQ+ youth including school going learners have been a global concern (Wike et al., 2022). There has been a shift in the international community toward policy reform and protection of the human rights of LGBTQ+ students to support resilience constructions.

Resilience encompasses a range of protective mechanisms that are culturally and contextually bound (Ungar, 2015). For example, adaptation and growth mechanisms in resilience protect against maladjustment in the face of severe risks to life and function (Wright and Masten, 2010). Furthermore, internal and external adaptability, as well as the ability to manage and harmonize multiple domains of functioning, are critical to resilience (Masten, 2014). Ecologically, resilience includes interconnected protective characteristics at individual and contextual levels (Ungar, 2015). The ecological study of resilience stresses the capability of a specific ecology to provide resources that are relevant and dependable to optimize wellbeing in adversity (Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021). In addition, the multisystemic perspective examines interactions between multiple systems in an ecological context (Ungar, 2021). The multisystemic resilience approach foregrounds situational and cultural factors that shape protective factors and processes. In this sense, a network of protective and promotive factors and processes across biological, psychological, social, structural, institutional, and environmental systems fosters the resilience process (Theron et al., 2022). Also, direct systems (parent, teacher, peer relational supports, antibullying school policies, uniform policies, and gender non-binary bathrooms) or indirect systems (national Department of Education inclusive policies) support LGBTQ+ youth resilience trajectory in school settings (Francis and McEwen, 2023; Theron et al., 2023).

To this end, research (i.e., Fernandes et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2019a) from the international community strongly suggests a more holistic approach in intervention to LGBTQ+ student issues involving multiple systems such as whole stakeholder involvement including parents and the wider community, such is consistent with multisystemic resilience approaches. In a multi-country study conducted by Ioverno (2023) involving 66,851 LGBTI youth aged 15–24 from 30 European countries investigating whether national inclusive policies represent protective factors for LGBTI youth in Europe. This study shows that youth who have multiple protective policies in their countries have fewer experiences of minority stress and have a higher degree of life satisfaction. This study has also observed the protective role of inclusive school curricula and supportive teacher relationships. Similarly, in the United States studies such as Day et al. (2019) and McDermott et al. (2023a,b) show that policies such as antibullying at the school level and national policies are associated with a positive school climate for LGBTQ+ learners. Hence, there is a global need to move toward inclusion and promotion of the resilience of LGBTQ+ school-going youth. There is a paucity in the resilience literature particularly in South Africa on the positive impact of affirmation in schools particularly on how schools can enable LGBTQ+ learners resilience. This research revealed the positive impact of affirmative practices in rural school ecologies.

2 Theoretical framework

The current study draws on the Multisystemic Resilience Framework (Ungar, 2021). The multisystemic resilience framework was used as a lens to explore and understand social and environmental supersystems within a school environment co-facilitate LGBTQ+ youth resilience processes. The paper

conceptualizes resilience-enabling ecological resources as reliable, dependable and contextually meaningful resources that promote normative functioning within the delimited study context (Ungar, 2011). Within the school context such could be the presence of social, structural, institutional and cultural resources that foster inclusion of sexual and gender diversity.

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Research paradigm

Socio-constructivist and critical theory served as paradigmatic lenses that guided this research perspective (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Socio-constructivist epistemology explores the participants' views rather than relying on objective knowledge (Becvar and Becvar, 2014). Furthermore, critical theory, in its endeavors to look at history, societal position, and prominent culture, influences the understanding of reality by looking at how individuals are positioned in the community (Sankofa, 2021). The critical theory advocates for the inclusion and social justice of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ youth (Jackson et al., 2018). From a critical theory perspective access to resilience-enabling resources by LGBTQ+ youth that foster school engagement is necessary to promote their human rights. School ecologies should foster inclusion by creating an affirming environment and providing resources that would promote school engagement of gender and sexual minorities.

3.2 Research design

This study followed a qualitative interpretative phenomenological research design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Interpretive phenomenological research design refers to a study of personal or lived experiences by the researcher. Using this design, the researchers were able to delve deeper and elicit a rich and in-depth understanding and interpretations of a phenomenon experienced by research participants (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The phenomenological research approach emphasizes the validity of the way things appear to the consciousness of the participants, as well as the validity of an individual's perceptions and subjective meanings of the experiences of the research participants (Engward and Goldspink, 2020; Miller et al., 2018).

3.3 Sampling procedure

Twelve participants aged 16–30 years, residing or having grown up in Free State province of South Africa in a rural area, and who self- identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other identities indicated by a plus sign (LGBTQ+) were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling procedures (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method selective or subjective sampling that the researcher uses to decide on the population members suitable for a study. In this snowball sampling procedure, initially, participants (using purposive sampling) recruited other participants who met the inclusion criteria (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Free State Rainbow Seeds recruited participants; a non-profit organization working with LGBTQ+ people in the Free State province in South Africa. They recruited eight participants altogether, then the remaining four participants were recruited by participants after doing their interviews.

3.4 Data generation

3.4.1 Interviews

The first author and researcher conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants. Two participants were interviewed in their homes, while seven were interviewed at local parks; one participant was interviewed at a local library and two participants at their workspace. The researcher had to be cautious in conducting the interviews where participants felt safe and secure given the prevailing risk factors faced by LGBTQ+ youth in rural communities (Daniels et al., 2019; Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021; Wike et al., 2022). Participants were asked to tell a story: "Take me on your journey toward discovering, working through, or accepting your gender and sexual identity." then the researcher asked them semi-structured interview questions as they related their stories. Participants during interviews related experiences they had in their respective school environments, and the data derived was used in the writing of this paper.

3.5 Data analysis

The research data was analyzed with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with Atlas Ti serving as a tool in the data analysis process (Engward and Goldspink, 2020). After data analysis, to ensure the credibility of research findings participants were requested to evaluate the study findings; thereafter, they were asked to provide their overall impressions, assess the correctness of the findings, and suggest any elements that should be excluded from the data analysis.

4 Literature review

4.1 South African rural communities and schools

In South Africa, the Apartheid regime's legacy resulted in various societal imbalances, such as creating traditional rural homestands, townships, and urban areas (Ratele, 2017; Shefer et al., 2015). Rural communities are characterized by a culture of communalism (Theron et al., 2013). Theron (2016) highlights the significant emphasis this culture places on the collective norms and values shared within the community. Rural communities often exhibit collectivist cultural values, which can present difficulties in implementing LGBTQ+ inclusion policies in educational institutions and society as a whole. The challenges primarily arise from the impact of conservative religious perspectives, communal norms, and collective principles, as emphasized by Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2019). Rural areas are often associated

with poverty, limited resources, dysfunction, and inadequate health and education systems (Balfour, 2016). In the post-colonial culture of post-apartheid South Africa, there are significant structural limitations that often impede the successful implementation of policies and the promotion of inclusivity in rural communities, particularly in rural schools. These constraints are primarily based on heterosexual and cisnormativity norms. These constraints are primarily based on hetero and cisnormative norms (Francis, 2017; Francis and Kuhl, 2020; Gyamerah et al., 2019). Rural communities in various international contexts also maintain conservative religious perspectives on sexuality, akin to the African context (Rand and Paceley, 2022). The prevalence of conservative attitudes toward sexuality in rural communities worldwide is a significant factor contributing to the marginalization and mistreatment of LGBTQ+ young individuals in society (Wike et al., 2022).

4.2 Compulsory hetero-cisnormativity in the education sector

South African schools at large exhibit heterosexist tendencies by promoting compulsory heterosexuality and cisnormativity (Francis, 2017). Exclusionary tendencies may be observed in the formalized curriculum and pedagogy as well as in informal structures such as the school culture. In addition, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ encounter discrimination and bias from their peers, educators, and school administrators (Francis and Kuhl, 2020), indicating that resilience within a school setting is a complex and interconnected process involving active engagement at behavioral, emotional, and cognitive levels (Theron et al., 2022). School engagement is influenced by various protective factors and processes within and outside the school environment. However, most LGBTQ+ adolescents encounter difficulties in actively participating in emotional interactions within a school setting due to a range of discriminatory experiences. Discrimination frequently leads to atypical behaviors, such as low attendance and dropping out of school (Daniels et al., 2019; Wike et al., 2022). Unlike Ghana and Kenya, South Africa has laws and policies in place that safeguard the rights of LGBTQ+ students in schools (Moreno et al., 2020).

Many South African schools experience a shortage of gender non-binary bathrooms, while their school uniform policies promote cis-normativism. Additionally, the school curriculum fails to address LGBTQ+-related subjects (Francis, 2017; Francis and Kuhl, 2020). Teacher training programs lack comprehensive instruction on gender and sexual diversity (Francis, 2017). In addition, the training of school therapists, such as educational psychologists, does not prioritize interventions that support the mental wellbeing of individuals who identify as gender or sexual minorities (Brown and Njoko, 2019). The culture of exclusion is prevalent in primary and secondary schools and is evident in higher learning institutions, as indicated by the literature (e.g., Munyuki and Vincent, 2017).

Furthermore, discriminatory practices have been documented in these educational settings. A qualitative study conducted by Brown and Njoko (2019) examined 11 students pursuing a professional master's degree in educational psychology. The study revealed that these students lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to support LGBTQ+ learners in affirming ways. An educational psychologist in training held religious and cultural beliefs that were not supportive of LGBTQ+ youth. One participant explicitly stated that they did not associate with LGBTQ+ individuals because they believed demons possessed them. This viewpoint could threaten their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities once they become qualified.

As an example, dual-method research was carried out in two provinces of South Africa, namely KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Gauteng Province (GP), involving a total of 22 participants who held positions as secondary school principals, deputy principals, and heads of departments (Bhana, 2014). This study investigated the prevalence of homosexuality and homophobia in secondary schools in South Africa. The study uncovered a prevailing atmosphere of sexual silence and denial within schools. Religious and cultural beliefs led to internal conflict among school administrators regarding their position on homosexuality. Queer sexuality was perceived as a challenge to conventional cultural norms. The study proposed that South African constitutional law and legislative policies can be utilized to challenge and undermine heterosexual power and privilege to combat homophobia.

Francis and Reygan (2016) conducted a study in which they interviewed 25 life orientation teachers in South Africa. The in-depth interviews included teachers from both rural and urban schools in the Free State (FS). This study uncovered instances of micro-aggressions perpetrated by teachers toward LGBTQ+ students. These microaggressions entailed making statements that demonstrated a lack of respect, unease, and disapproval toward LGBTQ+ individuals and the act of categorizing homosexuality as a deviance. Studies such as Bhana (2014), Francis and Reygan (2016), and Francis (2021) show that teachers often hold non-affirmative views, biases and prejudices which may be hindering policy implementation and resulting in experiences of exclusion of LGBTQ+ youth in schools.

4.3 Experiences of exclusion of LGBTQ+ youth in South African schools

LGBTQ+ learners in schools often experience discrimination and prejudice from both school staff and fellow students due to the prevailing heterosexist culture (Bhana and Mayeza, 2016; Daniels et al., 2019; Francis and Kuhl, 2020). The South African education system, curriculum, and school policies promote a mandatory culture that favors heterosexuality and assumes cisgender as the norm (Francis and Kuhl, 2020). The failure to acknowledge and accept the sexual orientation of non-heterosexual students often undermines the validity of their orientation, making them vulnerable to microaggressions from both teachers and peers (Francis and Reygan, 2016).

Bhana and Mayeza (2016) conducted a study on male individuals between the ages of 10 and 13 who were enrolled in a primary school in South Africa. The school was predominantly attended by students from a working-class background and of Black ethnicity. This study investigated the concept of hegemonic masculinity to gain insight into the role of power in instances of

violence among African boys in primary school. The study suggests that due to the dominance of hegemonic masculinity, boys created a sense of separation from girls, femininity, and boys who did not conform to traditional gender norms. Participants in this study indicated that their carers at home instructed them that being gay was morally incorrect and that cultural norms did not permit it. This study examines the intersection of gender and sexual diversity with societal values that prioritize heterosexuality and cisgender expression. Widespread societal belief systems frequently hinder the recognition and support of gender and sexual minorities.

Similarly, a study conducted by Francis (2021) found that students of the black race belonging to the Basotho ethnic group encountered a higher frequency of microaggressions from teachers compared to their white peers. Furthermore, it has been observed that educators tend to perceive LGBTQ+ students as being excessively sexually active and in need of disciplinary measures (Francis, 2017). Francis (2021) demonstrate that LGBTQ+ identity is influenced by cultural factors, such as belonging to the black race, as well as the myths and stereotypes that individuals associate with LGBTQ+ youth.

Affirmation can be particularly difficult in rural community schools. Research conducted by Haffejee and Wiebesiek (2021), Johns et al. (2019a), and Daniels et al. (2019) demonstrate that experiences of exclusion frequently lead to atypical behaviors, such as low school attendance and dropping out, as well as internalizing mental health issues like depression and anxiety.

4.4 Toward understanding rural ecologies from strengths and resilience perspective

School attendance and educational achievement are highly regarded in rural communities in South Africa and are closely associated with resilience. Acquiring a good education provides a promising opportunity for young people and older community members to eliminate poverty and enhance their quality of life (Daniels et al., 2019; Ebersöhn, 2017; Theron et al., 2022). Multiple studies, including Fernandes et al. (2023), Johns et al. (2019b), McDermott et al. (2023a), and McDermott et al. (2023b), highlight the importance of school ecologies in actively addressing LGBTQ+ issues. Strategies listed for addressing LGBTQ+ issues include developing inclusive policies and promoting inclusive practices. Although affirmation is crucial for promoting resilience, South African schools, particularly those in rural communities, are filled with risks and have a negative impact on the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth (Francis, 2017; Francis and Kuhl, 2020; Gyamerah et al., 2019).

School ecology includes a learner, teachers, school managers, and the community. At a community level in rural communities, the exclusion of LGBTQ+ youth is reported as a global phenomenon (Daniels et al., 2019; Francis, 2021; Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021). Exclusion in rural areas is often typified by many risk factors and few relational supports (i.e., parent, community, teacher and peer support) (Wike et al., 2022). Rural communities in South Africa are generally typified by a collectivist culture entailing shared norms and values that mostly adhere to Christianity and the African religion (Theron et al., 2013). The prevalent compulsory values that are pro-heterosexual are often reflected in the school culture and practices. Furthermore, the notion of rurality is frequently associated with conditions of poverty, geographic isolation, low household income, material deprivation, inadequate funding, dysfunctionality, substandard education, and membership in the Black community (Mbabazi, 2015). However, Rand and Paceley (2022) suggest that resilience in rural ecologies should not be seen as insufficient but taking a different path than in metro and urban towns. South African studies such as Daniels et al. (2019) and Haffejee and Wiebesiek (2021) indicate how LGBTQ+ youth navigate the rural environment despite the risk factors found, including in schools.

4.5 The resilience of LGBTQ+ youth in a school context

Multiple studies have been conducted in Western nations, including the United States of America and Canada, focusing on the school resilience of LGBTQ+ students. Research conducted by Fernandes et al. (2023), Johns et al. (2019a), McDermott et al. (2023a,b), and Marraccini et al. (2022) has extensively documented affirmative practices within the school setting that have been shown to enhance the resilience of LGBTQ+ students. Furthermore, the scholarly works of Bhana and Mayeza (2016) and Francis (2017) highlight the urgent need to implement affirmative measures in schools, particularly in rural communities, as indicated by the literature on South African studies. Research indicates that affirmation can be attained by fostering a cooperative endeavor among education stakeholders within communities and the broader education macro systems.

According to McDermott et al. (2023a), school-based interventions for LGBTQ+ learners are successful when they involve all education stakeholders, such as senior executives, educators, school personnel, parents, guardians, and the wider community. In addition, McDermott et al. (2023b) conducted a literature review that examined 17 studies focusing on affirmative interventions implemented in schools. This review determined that the implementation of affirmative policies, the provision of teacher training, the establishment of school-based support groups, and other measures to address structural hetero-cisnormativity are associated with improving the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners. In addition, a study conducted by Marraccini et al. (2022) examined interventions specifically targeting the prevention of suicide among LGBTQ+ students within educational institutions. The review has identified factors such as a positive school climate characterized by various forms of intervention, highlighting that no single intervention is sufficient. Therefore, it can be inferred that a comprehensive, multisystemic intervention is required to combat bullying. From this perspective, a range of protective resources that include extracurricular activities, inclusive school policies, family support, school support, community support, and the promotion of school connectedness may be employed (Fernandes et al., 2023).

A study conducted by Daniels et al. (2019) in South Africa found that transgender youth living in rural townships experience a decrease in resilience due to their educational aspirations and the opportunities for self-expression they gain by participating

in netball alongside cisgender females. Although micro and macroaggressions are common in South African rural schools, Daniels et al. (2019) are one of the few studies that focus on the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners in these settings.

5 Results of study

The participants in this study reported risk factors and experiences of affirmation from teachers, school managers, and peers. Some of the narratives also touched on how parental support traded resilience for schools in cases of non-affirmation. The data used in this paper analyzed and reported thematically. Also, participant's direct quotations are provided to support the discussion.

5.1 Risk factors in the school environment

Participants reported various risk factors ranging from macroaggressions, such as being sexually molested by an educator, to microaggressions, such as discrimination, prejudices, and stereotypes from their teachers.

One participant, who identifies as lesbian, related their painful experience after "suffering in silence" from the traumatic experience she had when she was around the age of 14 when her teacher sexually molested her:

> Ahhm. You are not introduced to sex, but you are not ready, so this thing of being in something you never thought you'd be in—you have to be ready for sex. Even the sex was rough, and she (referring to her teacher) wanted me to be like a man. I was slow and fragile like that; she would say, "You did it wrong; let's start again. It is done like this (P10-Lesbian).

Compulsory hetero-cisnormativity in school is reflected through the uniform policy, which strictly stipulates the type of uniforms that boys and girls should wear to school. Participants who identify as lesbian and transgender in the study felt uncomfortable regarding being forced to wear a uniform that matches the gender assigned to them at birth. The following exceptions indicate various experiences of participants navigating non-affirmative uniform policies at school.

> "He [referring to the school principal] just shouted out of 1000+ children, "(calling participant's name), you know that you are a boy; take that hat off" (P2-Gay man).

Trans females and feminine presenting gay males also experience discomfort owing to cisnormative uniform prescriptions in schools as evidenced in the following:

> "There is a gay man at Thabanchu who left school. He is a friend; I asked why he left school, and he said no, they were forcing me to wear trousers (P5-Trans woman).

One of the barriers to including LGBTQ+ youth could be a lack of understanding of non-normative gender and sexual orientation. Cultural and religious prescriptions also seem to be playing a role in terms of gendered expectations from schoolboys and girls which is reflected in school uniform policies.

> Oh, things I came across. In my school, a boy wore trousers, and a girl wore a skirt. They did not understand that even if you are a girl, some girls don't feel comfortable wearing a skirt, so they were not understanding (P11-Lesbian).

School uniform policies in South Africa are drafted by school governing bodies in collaboration with parents. Existing South African school policies power to governing bodies to decide on matters regarding uniforms which may continue to exclude gender and sexual minorities.

The absence of gender non-binary toilets in schools is one aspect that represents the exclusion of non-normative sexualities and gender expression.

> "Yes, Girl's toilets, and they questioned that, and I couldn't answer that because I did not know whether am I am gay or transgender or what is going on" (P3-Trans woman).

Also, the other participant reported:

> "They never allowed me. I remember a teacher found me in girls' toilets, and she said my birth certificate does not say I'm a girl. It says you are a male and said, I'm comfortable using girls' bathrooms" (P2 Gay man).

P3 felt very embarrassed by the experience she had because of the lack of proper infrastructure in her school to cater for the needs of transgender learners. P2 opted to use female toilets, resulting from the awkward experiences of being bullied in male toilets. After being questioned by his teacher about their biological gender makeup, adding to his previous painful experience of being bullied, was an embarrassment which came with the confrontation.

5.2 Experiences of LGBTQ+ youth of systemic resilience within the school environment

The experiences participants had were related to resilience, including participation in life orientation lessons on LGBTQ+ issues. Furthermore, some teachers, including principals, actively addressed homophobic bullying and offered emotional support to LGBTQ+ learners. Also, there were instances where schools encouraged transgender participants to take an active role in sporting and recreational activities that match their gender identity. In other instances, owing to a lack of resources, certain bathrooms were assigned to be used by learners who were not comfortable using gender-binary bathrooms owing to bullying.

Relating experiences of having to present to the entire class, which offered a sense of affirmation and validation of sexuality and boosted confidence, this participant reported that:

> I would say my LO teacher is a darling. I feel very comfortable around her; I could do anything around her. Sometimes, she would just say, "Teroh, today's topic is about LGBTQ; just come in the front and do your thing," I would take my classmates through LGBTQ life (P2-Gay man).

She related her experiences with a teacher who encouraged her to express herself by changing her hairstyle and wearing a uniform that matched her gender identity. This participant also received support from the educational circuit manager, who encouraged the principal to let her wear what she wanted as long as she produced good results.

> So we had a school circuit manager who told the principal that no, as long as he produces good results, forget who he is, pass your judgment on the paperwork, and if he passes, don't have stress (P3-Trans woman).

Although the circuit manager seems to have tolerated this participant doing a female hairstyle and wearing a female uniform, accepting her gender expression was conditional, which raises concerns. Thus, it indicates that the education macrosystems are still heterosexist despite some themes of inclusion from some school personnel at the school level.

Another participant received affirmation from the whole school; they allowed him to wear a school uniform that matched his gender identity; this participant commented that:

> At school, those were the only incidents. Oh, I remember in [the] high school I went to. At first, there were days they would check if a girl wore a skirt and a boy wore trousers. It is like it was in their knowledge, or someone just looked at me to say, okay, this one is wearing trousers, and we will not ask him too many questions (P8-Trans man).

Despite unclear policy guidelines on uniforms, some schools actively take measures to protect LGBTQ+ learners from discrimination and promote human rights and inclusivity. However, given there are no clear education policy guidelines on uniforms schools are left to decide on measures they need to take on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ learners.

A participant who related experiences of bullying narrated how the teachers, including the school principal, assigned the toilets as gender-neutral and also addressed bullying by suspending the boys who continuously bullied him.

> So if ever boys are going to discriminate against you when you go to their toilets as much as girls are going to discriminate against you when you go to their toilets, I, as the principal, am going to give you toilets specifically for gays (P4-Gay man).

Although the principal provided a toilet, one might raise concerns that the participants' actual challenge was bullying, which was not addressed. However, the participant felt recognized and protected as a gay person in their school through the principal's act of affirmation.

> I remember the day I wanted to go to the boys' toilet, then there was this gang; I don't remember what they were smoking, then they tried to insult me and asked me, What do you want here, you gay? Then I ran to Mr. Buffel and told him the whole story (P4-Gay man).

A participant who was allowed to self-express and teach girls to dance at her school reported that:

> Teachers were not judgmental. They supported me this way: I am a dance choreographer and a dancer, so I used to teach children to dance at school. After school, I taught them Setswana dance, sepotjwa dance, and all that, so we went to shows. They gave me a room at school. I was dealing with girls, saying they said you would work with girls (P5-Trans woman).

Participants reported instances of affirmation from school personnel including school managers. The reports by participants were resilience-enabling in that the social support system facilitated emotional comfort, a sense of belonging, and confidence. Despite affirmation, there is a need to challenge structural hetero and cisnormativity in schools as well as more psychoeducation to education stakeholders about gender and sexual diversity.

6 Discussion

According to the account of a participant in this research who identifies as a lesbian, they experienced sexual assault by their female teacher. The omission of discussions surrounding nonconforming gender expression and sexuality in educational institutions is a dangerous practice that can result in students being subjected to sexual abuse by teachers and others, with the victims often choosing to remain silent about their experiences. An ongoing issue is the absence of gender and sexual diversity representation in the curriculum, as well as the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality in schools (Francis and Kuhl, 2020). Although South Africa has implemented progressive laws to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, the lack of affirmation at the school level can be attributed to deeply ingrained heterosexist education systems (Bhana, 2014). Training for educational psychologists and teachers does not prioritize offering therapeutic and professional support to gender and sexually diverse learners (Brown and Njoko, 2019).

Toward inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in school is an active reform of the system starting with the wider education macro system (Francis, 2017). Inclusion involves the entire ecosystem and stakeholders including parents and the community need to be involved to mitigate barriers (Fernandes et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2019a; McDermott et al., 2023a). Being more inclusive of gender and sexual minorities in schools' buffers negative effects that come with exclusion and promotes the emotional engagement of LGBTQ+ learners.

The present study shows that the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners is informed by intersecting multiple systems such as relational support from teachers, peers and parents. Also,

school structural systems such as affirmative culture and policies significantly contribute to the resilience process. Daniels et al. (2019) show that transgender female school learners felt affirmed by playing a competitive netball game with cisgender females. Similarly, this study showed how participants valued opportunities created by schools to participate and sports and recreational activities. Despite this, as noted in this research like studies such as Francis (2017) and Francis and McEwen (2023) some schools seem to be promoting the culture of hetero normativity which marginalizes LGBTQ+ learners in schools.

The emotional engagement of LGBTQ+ learners at school is negatively impacted by the experiences of microaggressions from teachers, as well as the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality through uniform policies and the absence of gender non-binary bathrooms. The internalization of structural and relational risks within schools leads to the internalization of homonegativity, which frequently manifests in atypical behaviors like dropping out of school. Lack of affirmation in schools is frequently a result of overlapping identifiers, such as being part of a rural community and adhering to conservative cultural and Christian values, as indicated in this study. Nevertheless, rural communities also possess collectivist cultural norms and certain conflicting doctrinal Christian principles that either exhibit tolerance or even acceptance toward LGBTQ+ individuals (Gyamerah et al., 2019; Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021; Theron et al., 2013). Parental involvement, as a crucial education stakeholder, plays a significant role in interventions aimed at promoting the resilience of LGBTQ+ youth; however, due to a combination of factors, including their conservative religious beliefs that prioritize heterosexuality and the prevailing heteronormative values into the broader community. In addition, Nichols (2021) demonstrates in this study that some parents continue to support their LGBTQ+ children, but they frequently face discouragement from prevailing heterosexist and cisgender structures.

7 Limitations of the study

The present study was only conducted with twelve youths who identify as LGBTQ+ in a rural South African context. Previous research has indicated the collaborative role of different practitioners in tailoring affirmative policies and developing inclusive practices. Teachers and School-Based Support Teams (SBST) still need to be engaged. Also, parents as important stakeholders were not interviewed in this research. However, as a point of departure the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ on how different systems inclusive of teachers, school managers, parents and communities were reported in this study. Nevertheless, it's still important to explore both challenges encountered and strategies that education stakeholders in enabling the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners. Engaging other stakeholders will aid in effective policy implementation in rural schools.

8 Implications and future studies

However, the findings of this study indicate that rural schools in Free State province are not only characterized by a high level of risk and a lack of safety for LGBTQ+ youth. Some teachers, including school administrators, actively play a role in providing affirmation to LGBTQ+ students. Nevertheless, their endeavors are frequently thwarted by heterosexist educational macrosystems. Regardless, Francis and McEwen (2023) emphasized the need for South African research pointing to the positive impact of inclusive practices and creating inclusive school ecologies. This paper addresses the research cap identified by Francis and McEwen (2023). It also highlights that more emphasis on inclusivity, human rights and social justice in schools is needed.

The present study suggests that in promoting the resilience of LGBTQ+ youth in rural ecologies there is a need for the active involvement of all education stakeholders, at the micro level including parents and the wider community. Schools can champion LGBTQ+ youth resilience by providing or designating some bathrooms in the school as gender-neutral and tackling homophobic bullying by strengthening anti-bullying policies to include explicit statements that condemn bullying on grounds of gender and sexual diversity and the implications thereof. Also, the culture of inclusion needs to be reflected in school uniform policies by moving away from gender-based prescriptions on uniforms. The South African National Department of Basic Education (DBE) must promptly develop a policy addressing affirmation practices for LGBTQ+ learners. This policy should specifically cover admission policies, uniforms, gender non-binary bathrooms, measures against bullying, and inclusion in school sports activities. Additionally, the Doe must conduct teacher workshops on gender and sexual diversity to ensure they carry out their professional duties with sensitivity and inclusivity.

Research from South Africa and the wider international community (i.e., Daniels et al., 2019; Fernandes et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2019a; McDermott et al., 2023a) shows that the environmental and relational processes that promote inclusivity can enhance the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners in their psychological subsystem, thereby boosting their confidence and sense of belonging in school. Research by Fernandes et al. (2023), Johns et al. (2019a), McDermott et al. (2023a,b), and Marraccini et al. (2022) has established a connection between the mental health of LGBTQ+ adolescents and their behavioral and cognitive functions, including consistent school attendance, active participation in school activities, and good academic performance. However, more research is needed on how school ecologies inclusive of teachers, parents and the wider community can foster the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners, particularly in rural community contexts.

9 Conclusion

The need to move toward policy reform and implementation of inclusive practices is global (Day et al., 2019; Francis, 2017; Ioverno, 2023). This study suggests that inclusivity in school should not only be reflected in school curricula and culture such as tackling homophobic bullying and uniform policies. Also, aspects of the environment in schools need to be altered (i.e., the creation of gender-neutral bathrooms) to create a welcoming environment for gender non-binary students. This study revealed that a culture of inclusion was evident in some schools despite the absence of

affirmative policies in the South African education system. This study shows that affirmative processes significantly contributed to resilience and a sense of school connectedness in LGBTQ+ learners. However, rural schools across the globe are still threatened by a lack of resources despite other threats such as non-affirmative cultural and Christian practices. Opposition toward affirmation of LGBTQ+ people in including learners in schools by Christian Pro-family organizations is also evident in African countries, in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Eastern and Western Europe (Francis and McEwen, 2023). There is, therefore, a global need to uphold human rights and social justice when addressing issues surrounding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ learners. Also, work collaboratively with organizations that promote inclusion of LGBTQ+ people. Moreover, when a system, such as a school or social system, demonstrates resilience, it can transfer that resilience to other systems co-occurring, such as the parental and individual systems of an LGBTQ+ child (Ungar, 2021). This means that schools should act as agents of change by fostering inclusivity by creating dialogues and educating parents about gender and sexual diversity.

Particularly in South Africa, the National Department of Basic Education (DBE) must promptly develop a policy addressing affirmation practices for LGBTQ+ learners. The case of Nare and others highlights the need for a comprehensive overhaul of South African education systems.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of South Africa (UNISA) College of Education Research Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

MZ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Unfolding the layers of LGBTQ+ identity, resilience, and multicultural perspectives in Vietnam

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My personal narrative, intertwined with the theoretical acumen of Queer Theory and intersectionality framework, is used within this article as one way of underlining the critical role of lived experiences in forming an insight into LGBTQ+ identity and informing the strategies necessary to support this community. Drawing on Queer Theory, particularly the work of scholars like Jagose, which highlights the fluidity and complexity of identity, this research will analyze the intersectional challenges faced by individuals in specific non-Western regions, particularly in Southeast Asia. These experiences are examined through the employment of a reflexive thematic analysis approach, identifying recurring themes such as (1) gender nonconformity in childhood, (2) the pain of bullying and social pressures, (3) cultural transition and self-acceptance, (4) family support and unspoken understanding, and (5) interaction with LGBTQ+ Communities in Africa and the MENA Region.

KEYWORDS

gender nonconformity, gender identity, society norms, Vietnamese culture, Asian culture, Western culture, family dynamics, cultural identity

A journey of becoming, 2024

Part 1: the seed in the sand

In a small town by the sea,
Where the waves whispered softly,
I traded Superman for a Barbie's gown,
Braiding hair, spinning round and round.
Laughter filled the air,
For a moment, the world was kind,
And I was free to fly.
—

Part 2: storms in the horizon
Storms on the Horizon
But the wind began to change,
As childhood slipped away,
By grade six, the laughter turned
To words that cut like clay.
Faggot, shouted from across the street,
A word that stung,
A shadow on my feet.

It marked the part of me
They did not understand,
Something different, something banned.
I loved a boy with a quiet heart,
In secret, I watched him from afar.
The world said love was only right
Husband and wife, I buried my light.
For years, I held the truth inside,
Until I found the strength to confide.
But when I spoke, he walked away,
And left me with more hurt to stay.
In the halls, they pushed and shoved,
Thinking my body was something to judge.
They held me down to see what was wrong,
Their cruelty silenced my inner song.
I said nothing, just carried the weight,
Unsure how to process their hate.
—
Part 3: emerging from the chrysalis
Then came a journey far and wide,
To a place where I could no longer hide.
In a land where freedom sang,
I began to bloom, despite the pain.
Six years of learning to live as me,
Not bound by labels—simply free.
And when my mother's time grew near,
I felt no need to cast away the fear.
Her love had always been enough,
No need for words, no need for labels tough.
She knew me in ways no one could see,
And in that love, I found the key.
Now as I look back, I see
A story of growth, of becoming free.
A child who twirled in Barbie's dress,
Who faced the world's cruelest test.
And through it all, I've come to know,
Identity is like the ebb and flow.
Not something fixed or held too tight,
But a journey through both dark and light.

Introduction

Research purpose and objectives

This research is deeply rooted in my personal experiences as an LGBTQ+ individual, examining how these experiences are essential for understanding broader issues of identity, resilience, and cultural dynamics. My journey, from growing up in a small town in Vietnam to cultivating self-acceptance in the United States, provides a distinct perspective on the complexities of LGBTQ+ identity across different cultural settings. The shifts in how my gender expression and sexuality were perceived throughout my life, from early acceptance in childhood to the profound rejection and trauma of adolescence, reflect the challenges faced by many individuals not only locally but also globally. These challenges, closely tied to social norms, cultural expectations, and intersectional identities, are further exacerbated by mental health struggles and the lack of sufficient support systems, particularly in non-Western societies like Vietnam.

The purpose of this research is twofold: *first*, to explore how personal narratives, such as my own, are integral to an understanding of LGBTQ+ issues in specific cultural contexts, including Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries; and *second*, to develop culturally relevant recommendations for improving mental health interventions and support for individuals across different stages of life. This research moves beyond individual stories by integrating intersectionality and cross-cultural perspectives to offer a more nuanced understanding of how various aspects of identity—gender, sexuality, race, class, and age—shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. By focusing on non-Western contexts, particularly Southeast Asia, this study addresses gaps in the existing literature on mental health support for people in these regions and proposes interventions tailored to these cultural realities.

Research questions

This research is driven by three key questions that seek to bridge personal experiences with broader systemic and cultural issues affecting the community.

1. *How are personal narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals essential for understanding larger systemic and cultural challenges?*

Personal narratives are not merely connected to but are elemental in understanding how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate their identities within traditional norms, family expectations, and cultural pressures. My own narrative, marked by moments of gender nonconformity, social rejection, and eventual self-acceptance, exemplifies how systemic challenges like heteronormativity, cultural stigma, and bullying impact individuals on a deeply personal level. By analyzing personal stories, this research will uncover how larger cultural and systemic forces shape the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people. Scholars such as Sedgwick (1990, 2003, 2024) emphasize that individual experiences are inextricably linked to broader cultural narratives and systemic structures, making personal accounts indispensable for analyzing identity formation. The upcoming sections will explore how growing up in Vietnam, being queer, and moving between nations have deepened my understanding of these connections, as well as contradictions, between personal and systemic forces.

2. *How does intersectionality (gender, sexuality, race, age, class) influence the LGBTQ+ experience across different regions?*

Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1991), refers to how various aspects of identity—such as gender, race, sexuality, class, and age—intersect to create unique experiences of both oppression and privilege. For LGBTQ+ individuals, these intersecting identities shape their encounters with discrimination, resilience, and mental health. For example, in Vietnam, cultural expectations surrounding masculinity and traditional gender roles severely punished my gender nonconformity, while in the United States., my gender expression found greater acceptance. In other words,

cultural nuances allow me to see myself from different perspectives. This research will examine how intersectional identities shape experiences across different cultural regions, specifically focusing on Western and Southeast Asian contexts. Through this lens, I will probe the relationship between family expectations, social norms, and self-identity, exploring how these dimensions conflict or harmonize based on cultural setting. Readers will see how my journey between Vietnam and the United States illustrates these complexities.

3. *What interventions can be developed to address the mental health needs of LGBTQ+ communities across diverse cultures?*

Mental health remains a pressing concern for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in non-Western regions where stigma, discrimination, and cultural taboos often hinder access to necessary services. While much research exists on LGBTQ+ mental health in Western contexts, it often overlooks the cultural nuances present in non-Western societies (Meyer, 2003). This research will evaluate the shortcomings of existing mental health interventions and propose culturally sensitive programs tailored to communities in specific non-Western regions, such as Vietnam. It will examine how Western mental health frameworks can fail to account for important factors like class, religion, and family dynamics in non-Western contexts. By incorporating insights from queer methodology and intersectionality theory, this research will provide suggestions for creating mental health interventions that respect cultural differences and effectively address the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Differences in class and religion will also be explored to ensure these interventions are as inclusive and adaptable as possible, addressing the diverse realities within communities.

Literature review

Cross-cultural perspectives

LGBTQ+ experiences vary significantly within specific cultural contexts, and the nuances of each society shape how identities are perceived and lived. In Vietnam, for instance, traditional values and expectations often present barriers to the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Research shows that cultural norms in Vietnam frequently marginalize non-heteronormative identities, framing them as outside of conventional family structures and social roles (Mai, 2024; Tyler, 2023). Unlike the broad generalizations about Western societies, where legal reforms and social movements have advanced LGBTQ+ visibility, Vietnam's unique cultural heritage, which emphasizes familial duty and social conformity, creates distinct challenges for people navigating identity and acceptance. Rather than categorizing these experiences as a simple contrast between Western and non-Western, it is important to examine the complexities within Vietnam's cultural framework. Intersectionality, as Crenshaw (1991) notes, is vital in understanding how individuals in Vietnam experience multiple, overlapping identities. These identities—such as being LGBTQ+, Vietnamese, and from a particular socio-economic class—intersect to create unique challenges and forms of resilience. For example, cultural conservatism combined with expectations around familial obligations can intensify the marginalization experienced by these individuals, shaping their paths toward self-acceptance and mental wellbeing (Mai, 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires culturally specific frameworks. The Asian American Queer Studies framework, for example, highlights the importance of placing LGBTQ+ experiences within the broader cultural narratives of Asian communities (Wu et al., 2010). Such frameworks allow for an understanding of how cultural heritage, community values, and intersectional identities influence both identity formation and resilience. By focusing on Vietnam's cultural dynamics and the intersectional nature of identities, this research aims to provide more nuanced insights into the lived experiences of individuals within this context.

LGBTQ+ identity and resilience

The development of LGBTQ+ identity is a multifaceted process influenced by various cultural and local factors. Cass (1979) introduced a model of sexual identity formation that outlines stages including identity confusion, identity comparison, identity acceptance, and identity pride. Each stage reflects a progression in self-awareness and acceptance of oneself, highlighting the impact of external social pressures. Recent studies have built on Cass's framework, suggesting that identity formation is not linear but rather a dynamic and ongoing process (Schwartz et al., 2013).

Queer Theory serves as a crucial lens for understanding LGBTQ+ identities, challenging traditional binaries, and allowing for the exploration of diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. Jagose (1996) asserts that Queer Theory emphasizes the fluidity of identity, which is particularly relevant in contexts where rigid definitions can be harmful. This perspective encourages the examination of personal narratives within broader constructs, providing insight into how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate their identities amidst cultural expectations (Sholock, 2007). Additionally, the work of Crenshaw (1991, 2013) on intersectionality highlights the necessity of considering how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, and class—affect the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in varied cultural contexts (McCall, 2005).

Mental health in LGBTQ+ communities

LGBTQ+ mental health services in Western countries, particularly in the United States and parts of Europe, are generally more developed and accessible. Over the past few decades, there has been a growing recognition of the specific mental health needs of LGBTQ+ individuals in the West, leading to the creation of specialized clinics, support groups, and mental health programs (Meyer, 2015). These resources are often designed to address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, including public discrimination, family rejection, and minority stress. The United States., for instance, has established numerous mental health programs aimed at supporting youth and adults, providing services such as therapy, support groups, and crisis intervention specifically tailored to the needs of this population (Russell and Fish, 2016). Additionally, legal protections in Western

countries, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and anti-discrimination laws, have contributed to an environment where LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to feel supported and validated, which has a positive impact on mental health outcomes (Herek, 2006, 2009).

However, while Western countries offer more comprehensive mental health services for LGBTQ+ individuals, there are challenges related to the Westernization of mental health research and practices. The prevailing models of mental health in the West often emphasize individualism, autonomy, and self-expression, which may not align with the cultural values of non-Western societies such as Vietnam, where collectivism and familial obligations are more central (Russell and Fish, 2016). This can lead to a mismatch between the mental health needs of communities in non-Western contexts and the frameworks through which mental health services are offered. For instance, therapeutic approaches that prioritize coming out as a key to mental health and wellbeing may not resonate with individuals in collectivist cultures, where coming out could jeopardize family relationships and social harmony (Nguyen and Angelique, 2017). This highlights the need for culturally sensitive mental health services that take into account the specific social and familial dynamics of different cultural contexts.

Moreover, the *WEIRD* bias in psychological research significantly impacts the understanding of mental health within LGBTQ+ populations. This term—referring to Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic populations—underscores the limitations of research that predominantly focuses on these groups, often neglecting the diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in non-Western societies (Henrich et al., 2010a). Studies have shown that mental health research often overlooks the unique cultural contexts that shape the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, leading to an incomplete understanding of their mental health needs (Budge et al., 2013). Existing gaps in mental health support are evident, particularly in addressing issues beyond AIDS-related concerns. While historical research has primarily focused on the psychological impacts of the AIDS epidemic, contemporary literature underscores the need for broader mental health services that address anxiety, depression, and trauma within communities (Meyer, 2003; Timmins et al., 2017). This is particularly pressing in non-Western contexts, where stigma and discrimination can exacerbate mental health challenges (Mai, 2024). Specifically, conversations about mental health in a Vietnamese context are completely rare, if not absent.

As a result, there is a growing recognition of the importance of culturally competent mental health interventions tailored to LGBTQ+ individuals. For instance, the incorporation of community-based approaches can enhance mental health services, ensuring they are sensitive to cultural norms and values (Meyer, 2003). Such interventions are crucial for effectively addressing the mental health needs of diverse populations.

Challenges in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the mental health needs of LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently overlooked due to several interrelated factors, including a lack of resources, social stigmas, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure. While Vietnam has made strides in LGBTQ+ rights—such as lifting the ban on same-sex marriage in 2015, although without legal recognition of same-sex unions—there remains a significant gap in mental health services that cater specifically to the LGBTQ+ population (Phuong, 2022). Mental health services in Vietnam are still largely underdeveloped, often treated with a mixture of traditional and biomedical practices, and specialized services or trained professionals are scarce (Dang et al., 2020). For LGBTQ+ individuals, this situation is exacerbated by the fact that their sexual orientation and gender identity are still seen as taboo topics within Vietnamese society.

The stigmatization of mental health issues is widespread in Vietnam, with many individuals reluctant to seek professional help due to fear of being perceived as weak or mentally unstable (Do et al., 2014). This stigma intersects with the marginalization of LGBTQ+ identities, adding additional layers of discrimination. The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations can lead to significant mental health struggles, including anxiety, depression, and internalized homophobia (Russell and Fish, 2016). Many individuals in Vietnam feel compelled to hide their identities, which exacerbates feelings of isolation and distress. The cultural expectation of *filial piety*—where children are expected to uphold the family's honor and wellbeing—creates immense pressure on LGBTQ+ individuals, many of whom feel that their nonconforming identities disgrace their families (Jacka, 2010; Nguyen and Angelique, 2017). This pressure can lead to increased mental health issues, as individuals may grapple with feelings of guilt and fear of rejection, further compounded by a lack of supportive mental health services.

Healing-centered engagement in mental health research

One of the key issues in the field of LGBTQ+ mental health research is the dominance of studies that focus on populations that are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD). This term, coined by Henrich et al. (2010b), describes the tendency for psychological research to disproportionately rely on samples from these WEIRD societies, leading to findings that may not be generalizable to non-Western populations. In mental health research, this WEIRD bias manifests in several ways. Much of the research is conducted in Western countries, particularly in North America and Western Europe, where the social, political, and cultural conditions differ significantly from those in non-Western contexts (Meyer, 2015). As a result, the mental health challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in countries like Vietnam, where acceptance is lower and resources are more limited, are often underexplored or misunderstood. For instance, studies on minority stress—a prominent framework used to explain the mental health disparities faced by minority groups—are largely based on Western populations (Meyer, 2003). While minority stress theory has provided valuable insights into the impact of discrimination and stigma on mental health, its focus on individual experiences of stress may not fully capture the

collective and family-oriented experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in non-Western societies. In these contexts, the sources of stress may be more closely tied to family and community dynamics rather than solely individual experiences (Russell and Fish, 2016). Moreover, the WEIRD bias raises concerns about the applicability of Western mental health interventions in non-Western contexts. Many therapeutic approaches and mental health interventions developed in the West, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and other individualized forms of therapy, may not resonate with LGBTQ+ individuals in cultures where mental health is viewed through a more collective or holistic lens (Van Vu et al., 2022). For example, Vietnamese people may prefer and benefit from community-based or family-centered interventions that involve the support of their social networks rather than focusing solely on individual therapy sessions (Nguyen and Angelique, 2017).

To address this WEIRD bias, researchers must prioritize conducting studies that include diverse, non-Western populations and develop culturally sensitive frameworks for understanding LGBTQ+ mental health. This includes recognizing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in different cultural contexts and tailoring interventions to meet their specific needs. Without this, the global understanding of LGBTQ+ mental health will remain incomplete, and many individuals in non-Western contexts will continue to be underserved. A promising approach to bridge this gap is the model of *Healing Centered Engagement* proposed by Ginwright (2018). This framework emphasizes the importance of community, culture, and collective healing, rather than solely focusing on individual pathology. *Healing Centered Engagement* seeks to empower individuals and communities by acknowledging their strengths and resilience while addressing the historical and systemic factors that contribute to their struggles. In the context of LGBTQ+ mental health in non-Western societies, incorporating *Healing Centered Engagement* could provide a pathway for developing interventions that align with cultural values and community dynamics. By centering healing within the community context and emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals, this model could foster a more holistic understanding of mental health that resonates with communities facing unique challenges.

Queer methodology and intervention strategies

Queer theory, as articulated by scholars like Jagose (1996), offers a critical framework for understanding the diverse identities and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in non-Western contexts like Vietnam. It challenges normative assumptions about gender and sexuality, emphasizing fluidity and multiplicity in identities. This perspective is vital for examining how traditional gender norms are deeply rooted and highly defined in Vietnamese society, where sexual diversity remains stigmatized. People with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in Vietnam often navigate social expectations that compel them to conform to rigid gender norms, leading to marginalization not only based on sexuality but also due to intersecting factors such as class, race, and cultural background (Jagose, 1996). For these individuals, gender nonconformity can result in social ostracism, compounded by challenges such as family rejection, lack of legal protections, and limited access to gender-affirmative mental health services. The application of queer theory sheds light on how these pressures intensify mental health risks when they may feel compelled to hide their identities in a culture that prioritizes family honor and social cohesion.

In this context, culturally sensitive intervention strategies are essential for promoting mental health among LGBTQ+ individuals. A promising approach is the development of community-based mental health interventions. These initiatives engage local communities to create safe spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can receive support without fear of discrimination. Incorporating family members and local leaders into these programs can foster acceptance and reduce stigma at the community level. Educational campaigns that emphasize the importance of mental health and human rights within a Vietnamese cultural framework can be particularly effective in breaking down barriers to acceptance. Digital health solutions also offer a significant opportunity to bypass local and logistical barriers to accessing mental health services.

The concept of positionality, which recognizes how one's social and cultural identity shapes research perspectives and outcomes, is crucial in this discourse (England, 1994). As a non-binary person from Vietnam, my identity informs my work by grounding it in lived experience. This positionality allows me to navigate social issues with an insider's understanding of the cultural constraints in Vietnam while employing queer theory to challenge normative frameworks. My experiences navigating gender expectations and social rejection also shape my perspective on the importance of culturally sensitive mental health interventions. While Western mental health interventions often emphasize coming out as crucial for psychological wellbeing, in Vietnam, the focus may need to shift toward managing internal conflict in ways that preserve family relationships. By advocating for contextually appropriate interventions that balance individual identity exploration with family and community dynamics, we can create a hybrid model of intervention that is culturally relevant and scalable. Furthermore, combining technology with community-based approaches, as seen in the hybrid model of intervention, provides a pathway for mental health support for LGBTQ+ individuals across diverse contexts, ensuring that interventions address the unique challenges faced by these populations while promoting overall mental wellbeing.

Analysis of *A Journey of Becoming*

Theme 1: gender nonconformity in childhood

My early childhood was composed of one self-expression after another, those moments later forming sources of both joy and pain. I remember the freedom I felt playing with Barbies and trying on wigs, enjoying the novelty of changing into characters that somehow felt truer to my inner sense of self. These would be the toys that generally catered to girls, where I could explore a fluid and comfortable gender identity long before I had the language to

define it. My early times were marked by a sense of difference that lingered beneath the surface, which reflects the non-linear journey of queer identities. Stockton (2009) describes this as *sideways development*, where understanding of self emerges through detours rather than a straightforward, socially ingrained path. Stockton's framework on the queer child's sense of feeling something different also offers a lens into how my early experiences of queerness were shaped by creative exploration rather than explicit articulation. My fascination with fashion and with the aesthetics of femininity was surprisingly met with encouragement from my family—a quiet yet significant acceptance that felt unique considering the conservative environment in which I was being raised. It is in the family unit that most Vietnamese find their identity, with the parents taking a very protective role in the children's behaviors and expressions. The subtleness of my family's acceptance was not only an outlier but, more importantly, it spoke to traditional Vietnamese values' complexities that sometimes can accommodate nuance.

Not until I was in elementary school did I feel my interests were somehow not *normal*; as my friends considered these hobbies a departure from the gender roles that society, particularly schools, forced and molded students into. Vietnamese education, like most other heteronormative systems in the world, does enforce very strong notions about early-age gender conformance. By middle school, this had turned into active ridicule. My actions and non-conformity became targets for bullying and exclusion. Research by Kane (2006) further illustrates how gendered expectations start to take shape early in childhood and any deviations are usually socially spurned. In my case, traditional values that centered on familial duty and conformity, protective as they were within the family environment, became stifling within the school environment as the rigid gender binary was instituted, and I was forcibly made cognizant of a difference.

This contrast between the acceptance I received at home and the ostracism I met with at school reflects broader cultural and historical tensions within Vietnam. While family may be a source of refuge in many people's lives, more often than not, public attitudes, which have been informed by Confucian understandings of order and gender, have tended to marginalize and stigmatize those who have transgressed such culturally ascribed identities. This framework, with a focus on filial piety, respect for authority, and conformity to a strict hierarchy, often dictates the definition of appropriate behaviors. The deeply ingrained dichotomy is important to understand in grasping how the LGBTQ+ community navigates identity in Vietnam, which reinforces the values of family duties and social pressures. Furthermore, Vietnamese political history, particularly during and after colonization and the Vietnam War, has shaped public attitudes toward conformity and dissent. The emphasis on collectivism and national unity, alongside the legacy of a one-party system, has created an environment where deviation from established norms is not only frowned upon but can also lead to social ostracization.

As I grew older, my understanding of identity was now heavily shaped by traditional gender roles, with clear expectations for how individuals should express their gender and sexuality. Masculinity is often equated with strength, control, and dominance, while femininity is associated with submission and care (Luong, 2003). Vietnam's collectivist culture also emphasizes familial duty and community harmony, meaning deviations from the norm are often viewed as threats to family honor and social cohesion (Nguyen and Angelique, 2017). This context made my early experiences with gender expression and sexual orientation particularly fraught. I internalized a deep sense of shame about my nonconformity, feeling as though my authentic self was somehow an affront to the values I had been raised to uphold. This tension is reflective of the findings of researchers such as Manalastas et al. (2017), who has explored how LGBTQ+ individuals in Southeast Asian societies often face a double burden of conforming to both familial and societal expectations. Fortunately, my family is an exception and my interaction with them is not typical of the overall experience of others in the community.

Theme 2: violence and social pressures

Middle school inaugurated a distressing time of bullying, where my *failure* to conform to the standards of traditional gender roles became an easy focal point for perpetrators. I was often referred to as *freak* or *pervert* (translated to as *biến thái* in Vietnamese) and *sissy* (translated to as *bóng lộ* in Vietnamese)—terms that used the vilest forms of homophobic innuendos. The bullying I suffered was not confined to mere name-calling but went as far as hurting me emotionally and sometimes even physically. It goes in tune with such studies as Kosciw et al. (2020) that focus on the disproportionate rates of bullying for LGBTQ+ youth within educational institutions. It was not just my peers, from teachers to other personnel of authority, implicit expectations were always there to modify my behavior to forcibly make me heteronormative. What made this experience particularly traumatic was when my body turned into an experiment for my classmates. They did not even tease me across the room but dissected my body from some cruel curiosity as if there was something wrong with me and they needed to find it. It had crossed over the threshold of insults to invasive touching under the guise of *figuring out* what was wrong with me. They touched me, probed me, and violated my boundaries to render my body a reason for their jests and an object of experimentation as if their hands were trying to solve the puzzle of my existence. It was not mere bullying but a horrific way of sexual curiosity aimed at dehumanizing me.

These physical violations were not anything to do with curiosity or misunderstanding but a performance of power that meant to demean and strip me of dignity and identity. My body was rendered a site for their investigation as if they sought to find and confirm the *wrongness* in them being pointed out by me. It was not an isolated incident but a string of violations that merely added to the emotional hurt caused, making me feel like an object that had been shattered into pieces. This inappropriate touching and *experimentation* exemplifies Foucault's (2003) concept of biopower, where social hierarchies and norms enforce control over individuals. These acts go beyond mere coercion and indicate a larger cultural dynamic in which queer bodies render sites of power struggles and imposition of heteronormative dominance. Additionally, the personal violations I faced were deeply tied to Foucault's (1977) and Foucault et al.'s (1978) concept of surveillance, where the gaze of peers and the pressure to conform

to social norms functioned as tools of control. The constant monitoring and invasive actions underscored how queer bodies are policed in daily interactions. These acts were emblematic of a broader culture that seeks to regulate and discipline those who deviate from prescribed gender and sexual norms, perpetuating cycles of trauma and exclusion.

It was during this time that I also dealt with unrequited love—a relatively complicated part of my identity. I developed feelings for a male classmate, but the social pressure of concealment meant these emotions had to be shrouded in secrecy. When I finally did come out with them, the response to deal with was an awkward rejection that became the fodder for gossip amongst my cohorts. What was private was now public, the amplification of my vulnerability, coupled with feelings of shame and isolation, which were already intense. This reaction merely deepened my sense of alienation and resulted in the repression of my desires. This unreturned love added to the emotional burden furthered by the rejection of society, pushing me further into a deeper sense of self-hatred and thus mirroring the symptoms of minority stress that Meyer's (2003) theory described among LGBTQ+ individuals. In other words, there exists a chronic psychological burden furthered by social stigma.

This traumatic incident I experienced in high school was part of years of bullying and violence. This was physical abuse by some of my classmates, which deprived me of my bodily autonomy and cast a deep scar on my consciousness. The scene was one of extreme humiliation—the already vulnerable child was taken advantage of by peers to reinforce their otherness even more. The moment was deep in assaulting my sense of self and integrity of the body, representing a fractured relationship with the body. Literature on trauma and body autonomy, particularly among LGBTQ+ individuals, shows how such violations often have significant impacts on self-perception and identity, leading to long-term psychological harm (Grossman and D'Augelli, 2007; Herman, 1992; Stocks, 2007). What happened to me marked a turning point in my journey-a moment in time that devastated me but eventually fueled my resilience to begin what was sure to be an arduous process of healing.

Theme 3: cultural transition and self-acceptance

Coming to the United States to study in Brooklyn, New York was a profound turn in the journey of self-discovery. In contrast with the conservative, heteronormative atmosphere of my hometown, Brooklyn started to become the space that allowed more acceptance, where I could finally start exploring my identity openly. The cultural environment of this vibrant borough allowed me to encounter people who embraced diverse expressions of gender and sexuality, which seemed unprecedented to me. This atmosphere empowered me to shed layers of internalized shame and self-repression that had suffocated me for years. For the first time, I finally felt my identity was something to be celebrated, not erased. While my experience in Brooklyn and surrounding areas highlighted the transformative power of affirming spaces, it also underscored the disparities within the host country. It is imperative to recognize that not all states offer similar opportunities for acceptance. Areas such as Florida or Tennessee, for instance, have seen ongoing backlashes against the community, particularly targeting young transgender individuals (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024; Human Rights Campaign, 2024).

This geographical context aligns with what Braidotti (2011) and Haraway (1991) discuss through the term *politics of location*, which is acknowledging how physical spaces shape the identity (re)formation process. Brooklyn, with its progressive stance on LGBTQ+ issues, became a venue for my unlearning/unbecoming social constraints imposed in my home country. Such a contrast between my experiences in Vietnam and the United States reveals how identity formation does not happen in isolation but is deeply embedded within cultural, political, and economic forces. This is also consistent with Butler's (1988, 2002) concept of performativity and D'Augelli's (1994) life span model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development, which emphasizes how the social environment plays a crucial role in identity formation.

Besides, migration, for me, was not merely a geographic relocation but a bodily reorientation, as indicated in Gorman-Murray's (2007) *Rethinking Queer Migration through the Body*. The interplay between space and queer identity further resonates with Valentine and Skelton's (2003) work on paradoxical queer spaces. While the anonymity of urban landscapes in Brooklyn allowed me to explore facets of my identity, the hypervisibility of certain queer spaces sometimes perpetuated new forms of exclusion based on race and class. Many times, I felt I was at an intersection between my ethnic and sexual identities, trying to make sense of the values of my culture against progressive views on gender and sexuality here in the host country. One stark example of this was when working with my peers on the identity discussions, there was an assumption that my experiences and beliefs were the same, if not identical, to other people in the United States who identified as LGBTQ+. This genuinely minimized my background altogether. Besides, in one Pride Month discussion, I was surrounded by utterances of joy and celebration but found the struggle of articulation burdensome to describe how pride was different in my experience, as it was shaped by my cultural background and the residues of traditional expectations. Another example was when I attended a *Diversity and Inclusion* event in my community. It was highly vibrant and welcoming, yet there was some kind of dissonance in me, as in discussions on sexual liberation that sometimes sounded alien from where I came from. It was the fetishization of non-Western identities and putting people out as objects based on certain characteristics that made me understand how my identity could be both marginalized and reconstituted according to others. In other words, with LGBTQ+ spaces in the United States often dominated by white, middle-class individuals, I sometimes felt marginalized due to my Asian heritage and the specific cultural experiences I carried with me from Vietnam. This sense of alienation is reflective of the broader issue of racial exclusion within the community, where people of color often feel that their identities are either erased or tokenized (Battle and Ashley, 2008; Narvaez et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the intersection of class and identity has played a significant role in shaping my experiences. Growing up in a working-class family in Vietnam, financial concerns were always

at the forefront of my family's life, and my ability to express my identity was often constrained by economic limitations. Even in the United States, socioeconomic status continues to impact the resources available to me as a non-binary person, particularly in terms of access to healthcare and mental health services that affirm my gender identity. For example, the high cost of therapy and lack of inclusive healthcare options created barriers to receiving the support I needed to navigate my experience. This reality emphasizes the urgent need to address both socioeconomic disparities and the unique challenges faced by individuals in our community in accessing affirming care and resources. Indeed, studies show that LGBTQ+ individuals from lower-income backgrounds often face additional barriers in accessing necessary care, further compounding the challenges of navigating their identities (Burwick et al., 2014).

Theme 4: family support and unspoken understanding

While many LGBTQ+ individuals face familial rejection, I consider myself privileged to have the quiet support of my family. My mother's illness in 2022 marked a particularly poignant moment in our relationship. Although I never felt the need to *officially* come out to her, there was an unspoken understanding between us regarding my identity. This mutual recognition reflects research suggesting that, in certain cultures, explicit conversations about sexuality may be unnecessary for acceptance (Yip, 2005). In Vietnam, where open discussions about identities are often rare or even absent, my family's quiet support becomes even more significant. The cultural context tends to emphasize privacy, leading to a preference for keeping personal matters, especially those related to sexuality, within the family. This tendency often results in a delicate balance between public and private identities, where acknowledging one's LGBTQ+ status can feel risky. For many, coming out represents a radical departure from deeply ingrained cultural norms that prioritize family harmony and social conformity. The experience of keeping private thoughts concealed can create a significant sense of isolation, especially when social values reject the legitimacy of non-heteronormative identities. My journey illustrates how *coming out* can carry different meanings within this cultural framework. In my case, it was less about a formal declaration and more about a quiet acknowledgment of my identity that my family and I understood without needing to articulate it explicitly.

When my mother fell ill, our relationship deepened in ways that transcended traditional expectations. The circumstances of her health brought us closer, revealing that her love for me surpassed any social pressures to conform to traditional values. This unspoken acceptance serves as an unearned privilege that many LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in conservative cultures, may not experience (Ching et al., 2018). While some LGBTQ+ individuals may grapple with the denial of their identities due to external pressures, I found solace in knowing that I was loved and accepted within my family, even if our discussions remained implicit. This quiet acceptance allowed me to embrace my identity without the burden of formal acknowledgment, a privilege that starkly contrasts with the more public battles for acceptance that many face in less supportive environments. In this way, my experience highlights the complexities of navigating private vs. public identities within a cultural landscape that often favors silence over open dialogue about LGBTQ+ issues.

Theme 5: interaction with LGBTQ+ communities in Africa and the MENA region

During my time working with a non-profit organization, I had the opportunity to engage with LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Their stories were marked by unimaginable struggles, as many of them faced extreme danger and persecution in their home countries simply for expressing their sexual or gender identity. These individuals had to flee due to war, political instability, and violent homophobia, a reality that is well-documented in the literature on LGBTQ+ refugees (Shidlo and Ahola, 2013). In these regions, coming out or being outed often carries life-threatening consequences, far beyond the social stigma faced in more liberal countries.

Many of the people I worked with had been disowned by their families, exiled from their communities, and were constantly living in fear. Safe Place International provided them with a sanctuary where they could begin to rebuild their lives. The theme of belonging, so central to LGBTQ+ identity, was complicated for these individuals. While they had found temporary refuge, they were also displaced, cut off from the homes and communities that had once been a part of their lives. Their resilience was awe-inspiring, as they navigated a reality where safety was constantly at risk.

These experiences illuminated the stark differences in the nature of LGBTQ+ struggles between the Global South and the West. While LGBTQ+ communities in Western countries often contend with discrimination and mental health challenges, individuals in regions like the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and parts of Africa face existential threats that can be life-threatening. In many of these areas, same-sex relationships are criminalized, leading to severe legal repercussions, violence, and even death. The stakes are much higher; survival often becomes the primary concern, as people must navigate not only social rejection but also legal systems that actively seek to punish them.

I recall conversations with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers from these regions, which opened my eyes to their profound struggles. One conversation that stands out was with a young man from Egypt who shared his harrowing experience of being outed by a friend. He explained how a simple act of intimacy—holding hands with another man—was seen as a crime, leading to violent reprisals not just from the authorities but also from his community. He recounted how, after being discovered, he had to flee to escape legal punishment as well as the very real threat of mob violence. This conversation underscored the terrifying reality that for many, sexual activity can lead to brutal consequences, further complicating their quest for love and acceptance. Similarly, I spoke with a woman from Uganda who described how her identity put her in constant danger. She recounted a time when she and her partner

were ambushed by a group of men who had been monitoring their activities. In her words, *In Uganda, love can be a death sentence*. Her story made me reflect on the potential for similar violence in Vietnam, where social norms are also heavily influenced by traditional values. Although Vietnam does not criminalize same-sex relationships, there remains a pervasive culture of silence and stigma that could lead to violent reactions if individuals are discovered engaging in non-heteronormative behaviors.

Literature on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers emphasizes their vulnerability, particularly when navigating asylum processes that often overlook the intersection of sexual identity and geopolitical context (Millbank, 2009). Many of these individuals are forced to navigate a complex web of legal requirements while simultaneously dealing with the trauma of their past. Despite these extreme difficulties, they often find strength and solidarity within their communities. Through mutual support, they carve out spaces of belonging, creating networks of resilience even in the most hostile environments. This sense of community becomes crucial, providing not just emotional support but also practical assistance, as individuals learn to advocate for themselves and one another in the face of overwhelming odds.

Recommendations

Mental health support across cultures and demographics

Any improvement in the mental health outcomes of LGBTQ+ people therefore needs the inclusion of strategies that take into account unique challenges arising from diverse age groups, in addition to intersecting factors related to class and religion. Differences in the degree of acceptance or amount of resources may lead to variations in mental health and wellbeing for each demographic.

Regarding age dynamics, interventions for *LGBTQ+ youth* should be based on education, peer support, and safe spaces promoting the exploration of identity in a safe environment without fear of social rejection. School-based programs will become essential to this population, including services for mental health, policies against bullying, and counseling that is affirmative to LGBTQ+. Empowering in a way, these programs could enable young people to better cope with their identities and help build resilience against adversities (Russell and Fish, 2016). Moreover, the sensitization of teachers, parents, and other staff would provide a very conducive environment both at home and in schools, generally improving the social climate in which LGBTQ+ youth are living. For *middle-aged LGBTQ+ adults*, however, relationship dynamics, social acceptance, workplace, and family settings are the points of concern for them. Workplace-based mental health support and strong anti-discrimination policies are features that form the basis of settings allowing people to be themselves without persecution. According to Meyer (2015), the facilitation of workshops on workplace diversity and sensitivity training could foster an atmosphere of tolerance and respect where the mental health burden from concealing one's identity would be reduced. Besides, mental health interventions for *LGBTQ+ older adults* should pay particular attention to the heightened consequences that a lifetime of discrimination and marginalization can have. This requires special care that addresses both physical and mental health needs for this population, which is at risk for certain aging and social isolation-specific issues (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013). Programs providing social engagement and a sense of community, such as support groups and recreational activities, have the potential to greatly improve the quality of life for older adults in the community.

One cannot but note the role of class in shaping mental health outcomes—individuals in the lower socioeconomic classes, in addition to barriers to acceptance, have lesser access to most mental health resources and increased levels of stressors emanate from such financial insecurity. Interventions should ensure that affordability and accessibility come first so that all members of the community enjoy mental health support services, regardless of socioeconomic status. Furthermore, religion also features prominently in the creation of LGBTQ+ experiences, where faith communities can be sources of both acceptance and rejection. Interventions for individuals from religiously endemic backgrounds should be sensitive to the interaction of faith with sexual identity. Resources that promote the conduct of discussions within faith communities on the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals will go a long way in helping to diminish stigma and build acceptance. Workshops and discussions also include religious leaders and advocates to allow for reconciliation and support in keeping spiritual beliefs without renouncing one's sexual identity.

Cross-cultural approaches to advocacy

Cross-cultural advocacy must strike a very delicate balance between respect for local culture and the demands to push for greater inclusivity and equality. A powerful framework in doing this is through partnerships with local activists and organizations to ensure deeply culturally situated advocacy. In a country like Vietnam, where the roots of social life are based on family and community, the strategies for advocacy may involve educating the families about LGBTQ+ identities and fostering acceptance within these units. This way, not only is the respect paid to the cultural norms but also encourages gradual change from within the community.

Historically, solidarity in the Vietnamese context has been substantially modified in meaning and practice under the strong influence of the sociopolitical landscape and the impact brought about by various historical events. During the Vietnam War, solidarity was largely framed in terms of the struggle against colonialism and the fight for national unity. In this context, as Vietnam took on more explicit characteristics of a socialist state, notions of solidarity were made along the lines of class struggle and collective identity, often to the detriment of concern for issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Thus, rights concerning LGBTQ+ people were highly marginalized, trumped by general political concerns. However, over the last couple of decades, the notion of solidarity among LGBTQ+ individuals in Vietnam has changed. Notably with more social movements, the idea of solidarities not only around class, religion, and ethnicity but also around gender and sexuality has been increasingly taken into

consideration by a new generation of activists. It is manifested in the emergence of more grass-rooted organizations and community-based initiatives centering around the cause of advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, with increased demands for space that allows an individual to be acknowledged and celebrated for who they are.

International organizations, like Safe Place International, where I have had the opportunity to work with, provide important lessons about how to best support LGBTQ+ individuals in highly conservative societies. Where coming out often means putting oneself at a high risk of violence or displacement due to the political or religious pressure in the region, advocacy has to make safety and confidentiality a priority. These underground networks and community-based organizations provide safety and a sense of belonging that is very important to most LGBTQ+ individuals. All this can be extended to create global networks that can facilitate more support and advocacy to help empower LGBTQ+ people with the kind of wherewithal they need to negotiate oppressive ecologies while simultaneously agitating for broader systemic change.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my lived experiences, I have used my personal stories to explore the intersections of identity, culture, and resilience. My journey, from growing up in a conservative environment in Vietnam to seeking a sense of belonging in affirming spaces like Brooklyn, has served as a platform to highlight the profound differences in LGBTQ+ experiences across cultural contexts. These stories have not only allowed me to make sense of my own identity but also to connect individual experiences to broader, more complex discourses surrounding LGBTQ+ mental health and wellbeing. I hope to provide an intercultural lens through which we can understand how identity formation is shaped by the cultural and social environments individuals navigate on their own terms. In this way, my experiences become a means to offer insight into interventionist practices necessary to foster safer and more accepting spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those from marginalized groups.

Identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural context in which people are deeply embedded. In the case of Vietnam, due to traditional and cultural stigmatization associated with mental health and identity, culturally sensitive interventions become urgent in fostering acceptance and improving mental health outcomes. In this context, Western models of LGBTQ+ identity and access to mental health services do offer some useful lessons, but their generalizability depends on the ability to accommodate these cultural contexts within a non-Western framework. Research that uses an intersectional framework for examining the axis of identity markers such as gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture brings into discussion a far more nuanced understanding of struggles and privileges experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals across the world. For instance, the community in Vietnam has to negotiate intersectional difficulties within cultural, family, and institutional pressurization that are amenable to tailored community-based interventions. In turn, Western contexts may boast more institutionalized support systems but fail in their ways to overcome intersectionality, especially related to marginalized subgroups within the LGBTQ+ community. Such gaps can only be bridged by cross-cultural research and collaboration toward more inclusive holistic mental health frameworks.

The future of mental health for the community requires inclusive, culturally sensitive, and accessible interventions. Digital health solutions signal a new direction in reaching the most marginalized LGBTQ+ communities, where the service provision for essential mental health support may be scant or stigmatized. These digital platforms assure anonymity, confidentiality, and a sense of community. These could also be scaled-up models by infusing technology into community-based interventions and modified to conform to the cultural ecology in which they would exist. Lastly, future mental health interventions will need to consider diversity within the broad coalition of LGBTQ+ individuals by addressing the unique needs of different age groups, as well as racial and ethnic minorities living both in urban and rural settings. Mental health support needs to be revised in consideration of an intersectional approach, recognizing the fluid and multifarious ways oppression and marginalization occur that shape the mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ people. I am optimistic that as we come together for a commitment to culturally responsive care and advocacy, we can create a world where LGBTQ+ people everywhere can have access to needed support to thrive.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants or participants legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Experiences of trans women who have undergone gender affirmation surgery: a constructivist grounded theory

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Introduction: Gender Affirmation Surgery often referred to as 'Nirvana' in the transgender community in India is a major process that most trans women undergo. It is practiced in the traditional way as, the thayamma operation (midwife procedure) where the elderly transwoman cut off the penis and testicles without any anesthesia or medical supervision. However, the medical procedure of GAS in India is a recent advancement, which is accessible only to a few, the procedure that most trans women have undergone is penectomy (removal of the penis) and orchiectomy (removal of the testicles).

Aim: This study aims to explore the experiences of trans women who have undergone gender-affirmation surgery (GAS) during the period 2005–2023 in Chennai, India.

Method: In academia, research papers discuss the medical aspects of gender affirmation surgery but the experiences of the individuals undergoing this surgery remain under-researched and under-documented, which was the main reason to apply a constructivist grounded theory approach. Seventeen trans women from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Chennai, India participated in the in-depth interviews, which were conducted in two sessions, to gain insights into their lived experience of undergoing gender affirmation surgery.

Result: This study, using initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding, reveals both the positive and negative aspects of the surgery experiences of trans women using the five focused codes: decision to undergo surgery, support systems, healthcare experiences, postoperative outcomes, and impact on identity and well-being.

Discussion: The study highlights the resilient nature of trans women in India, who despite facing adversity, become advocates for better healthcare and social understanding. The findings emphasize the importance of inclusive policies and practices that address the unique needs of trans women.

KEYWORDS

gender affirmation surgery, experience, affirmative care, advocacy, resilience

Introduction

Trans women in India often face significant challenges when seeking gender affirmation procedures. Challenges arise from societal attitudes and lack of access to proper healthcare services. This leaves trans women vulnerable to unsafe medical practices, increasing the risk of physical complications and exacerbating the psychological distress that accompanies their gender transition.

Gender Affirmation Surgery includes procedures such as vaginoplasty, clitoroplasty, penectomy, orchidectomy, and metoidioplasty (Agochukwu et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2019; Selvaggi and Bellringer, 2011). Prior to the surgery, individuals usually undergo psychotherapy and hormonal therapy as well (Selvaggi and Bellringer, 2011). These surgeries are crucial in helping trans women achieve gender congruence (Breslow et al., 2021). In this paper the term GAS, is used to cover gender affirming practices of transwoman in Chennai ranging from traditional castration to surgeries taking place in unsafe clinics and the recent Gender affirming surgeries in hospital. By bringing all the affirming practices under the term GAS, this study collectively explores transwoman's experiences with GAS.

In Indian hijra culture, "Nirvana" involves the removal of male genital organs and the transformation into a woman's body through castration, along with a series of rituals (Tripathi, 2015). It refers to the ritualistic castration or shedding of male genitalia, a process that signifies both physical transformation and spiritual liberation, often used as an umbrella term within Indian transwomen to refer to all forms of surgical transition.

This practice significantly affirms hijra identity due to its physical visibility and ceremonial symbolism (Brinda and Gayathri, 2023). Historically, trans women in India have resorted to traditional methods for gender affirmation. Thayamma or "Dai Amma" operation (Srivastava et al., 2023), is a crude midwife procedure involving the removal of the penis and testicles without anesthesia, which reflects the extreme measures trans women have taken to achieve bodily autonomy (Petry, 2015). The journey of trans women to achieve alignment between their gender identity and physical bodies is fraught with various social and medical challenges.

More commonly, the majority of trans women undergo surgeries in unauthorized small clinics due to financial constraints and other factors. They pay nominal fees for procedures like penectomy (removal of the penis) and orchiectomy (removal of the testicles) for the removal of the penis and testicles without constructing a neo-vagina. The genital nullification surgery which is the combined procedure of penectomy and orchiectomy is also a part of the gender-affirmation surgery. Unfortunately, these clinics lack proper psychological support and adequate medical facilities. Autobiographies of prominent transwomen from India document the reality of this procedure. Living Smile Vidya in her (2013) autobiography describes the hospital where she underwent the surgery as a "slaughterhouse" Vidya (2013). Revathi on the other hand writes, "I had to put up with all these painful procedures if I wanted to become a woman" (Revathi, 2010:63). With increased medicalization and legal recognition of transgender rights, many trans women now seek Gender Affirmation Surgery (GAS) in private hospitals, where procedures are conducted under better medical supervision.

Scholarly literature has largely overlooked the experiences of transwomen who have undergone gender affirmation surgery. Studies in this area are predominantly on the surgical aspects, mental health, HIV/AIDS, stigma, and discrimination. Research on the experiences of transwomen who have undergone GAS in the Indian context is relatively new. Documenting these experiences will aid in identifying the challenges trans women encounter when accessing healthcare and quality of service, thereby informing targeted interventions and policies to improve the overall healthcare experience for transwomen undergoing GAS.

Numerous medical research articles discuss different surgical aspects of Gender Affirmation Surgery. Petry (2015) discusses various transformative processes for constructing the female body, including behavior adaptation, posture modification, voice modulation, hormone use, vaginal canal dilation, and surgical complications. Pariser and Kim (2019) examines the techniques involved and the outcomes of vaginoplasty. Saltman et al. (2023) compares the outcomes of Transgender orchiectomy (TGO) to cisgender orchiectomy (CGO) for nononcologic indications. Chen et al. (2019) studies the overview of surgical techniques used in gender-affirmation genital surgery. However, these procedures remain accessible only to a few, reflecting ongoing healthcare inequities (Subbaraj and Tirougnanassambandamourty, 2020). Gupta (2022) notes a significant rise in the prevalence of gender incongruence in India, with multiple centers now performing a high volume of gender-affirmation surgeries, indicating an increased demand for these services.

Stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings have significant impacts on transgender individuals. Poteat et al. (2013) highlight that such negative experiences reinforce the power and authority of medical providers, even when they harbor uncertainty and ambivalence about transgender patients. Similarly, a comprehensive review of transgender health services in India reveals that the transgender community faces significant discrimination and a high burden of disease, including mental health issues and HIV/AIDS (National AIDS Control Organisation and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). Transgender individuals often struggle with the psychological challenges that are inherent to their journey toward self-discovery and acceptance. The mental health requirements for gender affirmation surgery can be complex and varied (Marra et al., 2024). Calhoun et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of social support, finding that acceptance from support groups involves a process of change involving the self, relationships, and society, upheld through the willingness of the support person. Subbaraj and Tirougnanassambandamourty (2020) indicates that gender reassignment surgery significantly improves the quality of life, particularly in the psychological health domain.

Sullivan (2020) conducted a constructivist grounded theory study to understand nurses' gender transition experiences. The resulting theory, 'Becoming Myself,' explains the social processes nurses utilize during the transition and the barriers and facilitative factors they encounter in both personal and professional contexts. Extending this line of inquiry, Mathai and Pradeep (2022) study sheds light on the socio-cultural, economic, and health aspects of Hijras' lives, challenging dominant cultural narratives surrounding this ethnic group. Raghuram et al. (2024) explored the experiences of 63 transgender individuals in India accessing routine healthcare services, revealing intersectional challenges and negative impacts. Applegarth and Nuttall (2016) highlight the complexity of the therapeutic experience for transgender clients, emphasizing the need to understand their lived experiences in therapy. Nadan (2022) research focuses on the challenges faced by secular middle-class Jewish parents

of transgender emerging adults in Israel, shedding light on their concerns for their children's well-being and the support they need to provide. Persson Tholin and Broström (2018) study in Sweden reveals the significant barriers transgender and gender-diverse individuals encounter when accessing non-transition-related healthcare. Similarly, González and Veale (2024) research identifies the lack of trans-competent providers in New Zealand and experiences of mistreatment contributing to health disparities.

Mitchell and Howarth (2009) call for a comprehensive study on the economic position, experiences, and needs of the transgender population, emphasizing the importance of both quantitative and qualitative research to capture the diverse experiences of trans people. Understanding the experiences of individuals undergoing gender affirmation procedures is crucial, as it reveals the intricacies of gender transition and becomes increasingly relevant as more people seek to align their physical appearance with their gender identity. Through a constructivist grounded theory approach, this research draws a model to display the complex interplay of societal pressures, gender norms, and experiences of trans women.

Research question

What are the experiences of trans women who have undergone gender-affirming procedures, including traditional castration by Thayamma within the trans women community, informal surgical procedures in unauthorized clinics, and hospital-based gender-affirming surgery with medical supervision?

Materials and methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, Constructivist Grounded Theory by Kathy Charmaz (2006) to explore the experiences of trans women from Chennai who have undergone gender affirmation surgery. CGT highlights the co-construction of meanings between researchers and participants, making it particularly suitable for exploring the life experiences of marginalized groups. Instead of starting with a predefined theoretical framework, CGT allows theories to emerge out of data, ensuring a conceptual understanding of the stories of trans women undergoing gender-affirming surgery (GAS). However, the themes that emerged in this study resonate with broader trans-feminist perspectives, offering a critical lens to interpret the findings.

The study collected data from three non-governmental organizations that support trans women in Chennai. Seventeen participants were identified using snowball sampling. The researcher first interacted with NGO senior leaders, gaining their trust by explaining the academic intent and motif of the study. Projective techniques such as thematic apperception using images of familiar trans activists and news clippings related to transwomen are employed. The discussion of the autobiographies of trans women was also used as prompts, facilitating transparent communication. The researcher acknowledged her positionality as a cisgender academic working in transgender studies with prior experience conducting a master's dissertation on trans women in collaboration with one of the participating NGOs.Although this familiarity aided in building trust, it had no influence on participant selection because the researcher had no prior relationships with other NGOs or participants. The study focused on participant-led discussions, focusing on their lived experiences as allies to the trans community. Participants were chosen only based on their self-identification as trans women, not other genders or diverse sexual identities. To guarantee comfort and safety, interviews were held at venues selected by the participants, mostly inside NGO buildings.

Data was gathered in two phases between April and May 2024, followed by additional theoretical sampling in July 2024. An interview guide comprising semi-structured interviews was developed and verified in consultation with subject experts and community members, ensuring relevance and sensitivity to trans experiences. An official signed consent of my presence at the NGO was received and individual consent from each participant was obtained emphasizing autonomy over what they shared. Participants were informed of their rights to opt out of the interview if they felt uncomfortable at any moment. The questions were translated into the regional language Tamil. The interview duration per person was approximately 40 to 45 min. The interview transcripts were translated into English, internally validated, and further validated with the corresponding non-governmental organization. This process ensured the data's accuracy and reliability. Later, memos were written after each interview as part of the analysis to record initial thoughts and emerging themes for each participant, providing a detailed understanding of individual experiences, and a new set of questions was prepared for the second round of interviews.

Memos were also written to identify overarching themes and patterns. All questions and areas of inquiry were documented in the memos, allowing for a comprehensive and transparent record of the research process. Furthermore, insights gathered from external sources, such as relevant literature and expert opinions, were integrated into the memos. To enhance clarity conversational style, clear headings, and concise pointers were utilized to organize the memos.

Although there was no systematic post-interview follow-up process after the interview, the NGOs continued to offer community support to participants such as peer counseling, emotional support, awareness and better access to healthcare. For practical reasons and issues of participant privacy, direct follow-ups were not done. No further resources like psychological, legal, or medical were offered directly by the researcher. The participants did not expect any financial compensation, it was discussed before the interviews. Yet, in exchange as a non-monetary return, the researchers will share the study's results and final paper with the NGOs and participants.

Initial coding

Initial coding was conducted by carefully reading and analyzing each transcript, codes were assigned to individual words, phrases and sentences that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. During this process memos were used to record thoughts, questions and insights. A line-by-line coding approach was used, to identify early analytic ideas and potential theoretical directions (Charmaz, 2006). This helped to track the analytical journey and identify emerging patterns. As emphasized by Charmaz, initial coding was approached without preconceptions (Tables 1 and 2).

TABLE 1 Initial codes and subcategories of Round: 1 interview.

Initial Code	Sub-Category
Surgery Decision	Sharing of Experience
	Promotional Questions (Influence) Social Pressure (inside and outside)
	Coercion
	Personal motivation
Emotional Support	No Family Support
	Guru Support
	Self-Support
	Community Support
	Emotional Support of Medicinal Practitioners
Financial Support	Self Funding
	Partial Funding
	Insufficient Finances
	Support from guru (community)
Surgery Setting	Illegal Surgery location
	Inadequate facilities and infrastructure
	Adequate facilities
	Inadequate pain management (overdose/ underdose)
Post Surgery Complication	Unprofessional behavior by medical staff
	Inhumane treatment post-surgery
	Suspect unqualified medical personnel
	No post-operative care
	Lack of follow-up from hospital
	Side effect
	Re-surgery
Caregiver Support	No caregiver
	Guru as caretaker
	Negative caregiver experience
	Negligence
	Poor choice of hospital
	Family
	Self
	Community
Pre-Surgical Information	No prior Information
	HIV test only
	Limited test
	Inclusion of all test
	Potential risk/complication was not highlighted
	Lack of knowledge of informed consent before signing
	Availability of food prescription
	Non-availability of food prescription
Mental State	Fear
	No Fear
	Live or Die Attitude
	Anxiety/Panic
	Excitement /Anticipation
	Pray
	Self-determination
	Lonely
	Mental block

Focused coding

Following the initial coding of the round 1 interview, focused coding was conducted by manually reviewing and combining the significant codes. The most frequent initial codes were selected and analyzed to identify patterns, relationships, and themes. A table was created to systematically organize the data. Through this iterative process, the most prominent categories were identified, developed, refined and integrated into a cohesive theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006).

After the initial interviews, a second round interview were conducted using projective techniques such as thematic apperception and ink blots to reveal the underlying emotions of the participants. The questions for this round were developed from the responses of the first round of interviews and memos. Following the second round of interviews, the analysis was refined through a process of reexamining the codes, adding new codes based on the new data and updating memos. This led to theoretical saturation, where no new themes, concepts, or codes emerged from the data.

Theoretical coding

Theoretical coding helps incorporate core categories into a cohesive model. This stage focused on integrating categories to provide a holistic understanding of trans women's experiences with gender affirmation surgery.

Validating the conceptual model

Using the same interview guide, two more participants were interviewed, and their responses were consistent with the findings. This step helped ensure that the model was consistent.

Results

The research reveals the following as focused codes: decision to undergo surgery, support systems, healthcare experiences, postoperative outcomes, and impact on identity and well-being. The results highlight the positive and negative aspects of their experiences, offering insights into the complexities and challenges they faced. The

TABLE 2 Initial codes and subcategories of Round: 2 interview.

Initial Code	Sub-Category
Physical and Mental Changes (After Surgery)	Satisfaction
	Feeling better
	Look and feel like a woman (Appearance)
	Naturally appears like woman
	Change in body structure
	Gaining weight
	Lack of stamina
	No physical pleasure
	Mentally woman
	No facial hair/body hair
	Body language
Challenges	Discrimination by health care providers
	Pressure to confirm to mainstream society
	Hegemonic Gender Roles at relationship, workplace, home
	Social Isolation
	Social pressure
	Personal Struggles
	Identity conflict
Personal Relationship	Relationship Strain
	Alienation
	Support
Social Reaction	Positive
	Negative
Coping	Community Support
	Personal Resilience
Decision	Community Influence
	Desire to be beautiful
	Emotional readiness
Support Network	Community Support (Guru)
	Peer Support (Trans Community)
Medical Treatment	Discrimination
	Lack of professionalism/respect
	Professionalism
Reflection and learning	Regret
	Recent advancements (Awareness) (sharing it with future generation)
	Advocacy
Post-operative care	No post-operative care instructions
	No follow-up appointments
	Follow up
	Lack of psychological support
	Complications
	Re-surgery
Surgery Preparation	No Physical Preparation
	Mental Preparation
	Financial planning
Recovery Period	Physical Recovery
	No mentions of emotional recovery
Additional Medical Procedures	Hormone Therapy
	Cosmetic procedure-Silicone breast implant
	Laser
Mental Health Needs	Pre-surgery anxiety
	No mention of therapy pre- and post-surgery
	Depression
	Need for therapy but no finances
	No access to therapy
	To learn coping mechanism
Dysphoric After	Emotional Stability
	Residual dysphoria
	Insecurity

decision to undergo traditional castration, an operation with limited medical facilities, or proper gender reassignment surgery is influenced by various factors, as revealed through interviews. These factors include socioeconomic status and the influence of seniors. Specifically, individuals who opt for underprivileged treatment, such as non-medical castration or castration at unapproved clinics, often do so due to lack of support, awareness, and education. In contrast, transgender individuals who have undergone modern gender affirmation surgery tend to have better education, community support, and awareness.

Decision making

The decision to undergo Gender Affirmation Surgery is influenced by various factors, including transition motivation, social influence, emotional readiness, and the desire to be beautiful. Participants shared their experiences, highlighting the intricacies of this decision-making process.

Participant:1 described her experience of gender incongruence, leading to her decision to undergo surgery:

> *I felt mentally different, and I did not want the physical thing, when there was this realization in me I opted for the surgery* (Participant 1).

This experience of gender incongruence is a common theme among individuals considering GAS. However, the decision-making process is not solely individual; it can be influenced by various external factors, including social norms and peer pressure. Dean Spade (2006) states that trans bodies are subjected to a norm-producing medical discipline, where surgery is positioned as the only way to be recognized as a "real" woman. This perspective resonates with Participant 2's

experience, where she was coerced into undergoing surgery before she was emotionally or medically ready:

> *I was threatened to undergo the surgery. I didn't want to go through the surgery because I was aged and had high blood pressure and diabetes even before going to the surgery, but I was forced into it* (Participant 2).

Spade's critique that the reification of gender norms within trans healthcare creates a conditional form of acceptance where gender is validated through physical modification rather than self-identification applies to peer influence within trans communities, where gender affirmation surgery is often framed as a necessary milestone to attain complete gender recognition. Participants 3 and 4 described how seeing others undergo surgery created an implicit pressure to follow the same path:

> …few who underwent the sex reassignment surgery discussed about it … and others got influenced … We all had the desire to transform our bodies too. However, when someone gets the surgery and others don't, it creates a question like, 'Haven't you done it yet?' This question induces ego and makes people go for it, not by force but by desire after seeing the seniors of the community who got operated (Participant 3).

> People within my community including my transwomen friends have asked me, you look good like a woman, but why haven't you done it (Surgery) yet? (Participant 4).

For some individuals, the desire to be beautiful also plays a significant role in the decision-making process. Participant 5's decision was primarily driven by this desire to attain an ideal feminine body,

> *"I wanted to become a beautiful woman with a feminine body, free of facial and body hair, and with breasts"* (Participant 5).

This reflects the pressures of hegemonic femininity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), where trans women must conform to cisnormative beauty standards to be socially validated. These pressures make gender affirmation surgery less of an individual choice and more of a coerced necessity for social survival (Spade, 2006).

Participant 6 expressed satisfaction with the surgery outcome,

> *I am completely satisfied with the outcome of the surgery. I now look and feel like a woman in my daily life. The surgery has brought me satisfaction, and I am happy to have transitioned to a woman* (Participant 6).

Participants reported a better understanding of their gender identity as a positive outcome, which aligns with existing literature emphasizing the importance of gender congruence for mental health (Thoma et al., 2023). However, uncertainties about the decision and anxiety over potential outcomes were common negative experiences, highlighting the need for comprehensive pre-surgical counseling, support and necessary postoperative care (Coleman et al., 2022). Participant 4 shared anxious feelings after deciding to undergo surgery, highlighting the importance of support and guidance throughout the process.

> *After I took the decision to undergo the surgery, I was little anxious thinking of the surgery… will it be successful or not? it was not fear but a kind of anxious feeling of the major transformation ahead* (Participant 4).

Similarly, Participant 7 underwent surgery of her own free will, but experienced doubts regarding her decision, which is often due to lack of support.

> *I underwent the surgery of my own free will, without pressure from anyone. However, there was a mild oscillation accompanied by nervousness as I was alone opting for the surgery without any support from family or fellow trans women* (Participant 7).

This portrays the way that decision-making regarding GAS is shaped by larger social structures since trans women have to resist medical expectations, community pressures, and internalized gender norms when deciding about their bodies.

Support system

Support systems including family, friends, partners, community support, and self-support, play a crucial role in the experiences of trans women undergoing GAS. However, Namaste (2000) and Valencia and Zhuravleva (2019) states, trans individuals are often structurally erased from mainstream family and social networks, forcing them to rely on chosen families and trans communities for survival. The majority of the participants had the trans community as their support system. Support from family and cis friends was relatively low. However, few transwomen had the support of their partners. Positive experiences were marked by community engagement and connection, which provided emotional and practical support during the surgical process. This indicates a need for broader social acceptance and targeted interventions to foster supportive environments for trans women. Rejection from family and discriminatory experiences were significant negative aspects, underscoring the pervasive social stigma and negative mental health outcomes, such as depression faced by trans individuals in India. Chakrapani et al. (2018) and Namaste (2000) notes that this exclusion is not just personal but structural, reflecting how cisnormativity conditions family acceptance in adherence to gender norms, leaving transwomen to economic and emotional vulnerability.

Participant 8's experience highlights the challenges of lacking family support.

> *Initially, when I was about to go for the surgery, my family members came to know about it, and it caused a lot of problems. Tackling all that, I went for the surgery. There was no support from my family's end. I borrowed money here and there and felt left alone* (Participant 8).

Healthcare experience

The healthcare experience of trans individuals undergoing Gender Affirmation Surgery encompasses the following categories: access to services, provider interaction, facility and infrastructure, nature of the

practitioner, financial considerations, and location and setting of the surgery. The study revealed both positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences included reaffirmation of their gender identity and supportive interactions with healthcare providers. However, several concerns emerged, including financial constraints, improper procedures, involvement of unqualified practitioners, and anesthesia issues. This aligns with previous research indicating systemic barriers and disparities in healthcare access for trans individuals (Safer et al., 2016).

Participant 4's experience highlights the lack of proper facilities in hospitals, specifically in the transgender ward,

> *The surgery place was a little unhygienic… that didn't matter because I anyway wanted to get done with the surgery* (Participant 4).

In contrast, Participant 6's experience reveals the devastating consequences of improper procedures and unprofessional behavior exemplifying iatrogenic violence (Atuk, 2024) where healthcare settings become sites of dehumanization.

> *My surgery was not performed properly and my I was in a life-or-death situation. The unprofessional behavior of the doctors were evident throughout my surgery period as they were chit-chatting among themselves about trivial things… Even though I was under anesthesia, I could hear them giggling and talking about food and other daily routines* (Participant 6).

Similar to this is Participant 9's experience, it highlights the risks of unqualified practitioners,

> *The woman who performed my surgery is not a qualified MBBS doctor, but an assistant who has observed doctors performing surgeries and now performs them herself… Many people had to undergo a second surgery due to the inadequacy of the medical facility* (Participant 9).

Erickson-Schroth (2014) highlights that healthcare disparities for trans individuals are influenced by intersecting factors, including economic status and access to medical knowledge. Participant 7's case reflects how gendered neglect operates in trans healthcare, where even basic pre-surgical screenings are overlooked,

> *I wasn't given any information about the procedures before undergoing the surgery… Doctors had performed the surgery properly, but what became the problem was, that I had diabetes before the surgery which I was not aware of, and they didn't check my blood sugar levels… hich led to complications* (Participant 7).

The experiences of transwomen in healthcare illustrates how necropolitical power does not just operate explicitly through violence but also as systematic neglect and medical exclusion. Mbembe and Corcoran (2019) pushing vulnerable populations to life-threatening risks.

Postoperative care

Post-operative care is critical for the recovery and long-term well-being of trans women. Positive experiences were associated with supportive care from the community, facilitating physical and emotional recovery. However, many participants reported insufficient postoperative care, lack of follow-up with doctors, long-term complications, and limited access to therapy. These negative outcomes highlight gaps in the continuity of care and the need for integrated comprehensive care that provides ongoing support post-surgery (Carlson et al., 2021).

Participant 3's experience underscores the importance of informed consent and adequate post-operative care.

> *I underwent surgery without being informed about the procedures involved… I was not aware of the post-effects of the spinal anesthesia. As a result, I am now unable to sit straight for more than 30 minutes, have a hunchback, and severe pain in my spine. I am currently undergoing physiotherapy for both leg and spine issues* (Participant 3).

Trans individuals have the sole right to make decisions regarding their own bodies and that no political, medical, or religious authority should violate their bodily integrity (Koyama, 2003). Yet, participant experiences reveal a striking contradiction between this principle and the reality of medical neglect.

Participant 9's experience highlights the need for adequate post-operative care. She was discharged from the hospital without proper post-care measures and faced mockery from strangers, adding to her distress.

> *After the surgery, the doctors discharged us even before the removal of the urine bag. They didn't provide any post-care measures…I was also subjected to mockery by strangers on my way back from the surgery* (Participant 9).

Participant 3 also emphasizes the importance of self-care and support during the recovery period.

> *For the first 15 days, I had a caretaker attending to me, but after that, I had to do things on my own with the intention of learning to take care of myself and being able to care for others who undergo surgery in future* (Participant 3).

Participant 3 had concerns regarding the competence of her surgeon.

> *I felt pain even after being given anesthesia. As a result of a mistake during the operation, I now have a problem with my right leg* (Participant 3).

Identity and wellbeing

The impact of GAS on identity and well-being is multifaceted. Positive outcomes included increased satisfaction with the body, alignment with gender identity and enhanced self-esteem. These benefits are consistent with research showing improved mental health and quality of life following gender-affirming procedures (Hughto et al., 2020). Brinda and Gayathri (2023) conclude, that despite medical and specific surgical complications, satisfaction with transition is high. Nevertheless, some participants experience body dissatisfaction and insecurity due to fear of rejection. This suggests that while GAS can significantly improve well-being, comprehensive

support addressing psychosocial aspects is essential for long-term positive outcomes.

Participant 5 reports satisfaction with her surgery outcome despite experiencing post-surgical complications.

> *I am experiencing back pain, which is expected for trans women post-surgery due to the injections. However, I am very satisfied after undergoing the surgery* (Participant 5).

Trans feminist thinkers assert that individuals can define their identities and expect respect from society (Stone, 1992). It challenges all women, including trans women, to interrogate internalized gender norms, simultaneously acknowledging that liberation does not necessitate the rejection of all patriarchal markers of femininity (Koyama, 2003).

Reflection and advocacy

Reflecting on the experiences, the resilience and advocacy efforts of trans women amid adversity are revealed. The journey through GAS is not merely a medical process but a personal and social transition requiring strong support systems and affirmative healthcare practices. Advocacy for trans rights, improved healthcare access, and social acceptance are critical in addressing the challenges highlighted in the results.

Participant 2 emphasizes the importance of self-identification and respect for trans women's identities stating,

> *I decided that no other transwomen should go through similar pain … they should be given counseling and told that if they feel that they are women by heart, they are women* (Participant 2).

Participant 10 underscores the importance of informed decision-making and individual choice,

> *Surgery is not the only way to live as a transgender person… it must be an individual choice, not influenced by peer pressure. Proper representation and documentation of reality could help many people make more informed decisions about surgery* (Participant 10).

Participant 2 highlights the need for comprehensive medical evaluation and treatment before undergoing GAS,

> *Other health conditions like blood sugar levels and past medical history must be noted down and treated accordingly before proceeding to the surgery. Often it is just limited to HIV tests, this must change, All the advanced medical procedures must be made available for transwomen who opt for these surgeries* (Participant 2).

Serano (2007) posits that true gender equity involves dismantling both traditional and oppositional sexism, challenging the idea that transwomen must prove their identities to be recognized. Participant 2's statement "'if they feel that they are women by heart, they are women" reclaims transwoman's identity and rejects the idea that surgery or external validation should define trans womanhood (Figure 1).

Discussion

In India, the transgender community faces significant challenges, including social stigma, discrimination, and limited access to healthcare services. These challenges are compounded by socio-economic factors that further marginalize trans individuals, making it difficult for them to access necessary medical procedures, including GAS (Chakrapani, 2010). Despite the progressive legal changes, such as the Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act (Government of India, 2019), which aims to protect the rights of transgender individuals, many still encounter barriers in accessing gender-affirming healthcare (Raj and Dubey, 2024).

Transfeminism is critical of the medicalization of trans bodies, stresses bodily autonomy, and contends that trans women are not to be compelled into medicalized transitions as a condition of gender legitimacy (Koyama, 2003). Intersectionality is embedded within transfeminism, which helps in understanding various other barriers such as class, education, and family acceptance that shape trans women's access to healthcare.

Surgery access does not guarantee positive medical experiences, and trans women commonly find themselves facing a healthcare system that both treats and harms them through a process called iatrogenic violence (Atuk, 2024). In addition, Zengin (2016) describes "violent intimacies," which describes how medical institutions control trans bodies employing compulsory examinations, surgical gatekeeping, and institutional contact.

Decision making

Many trans women describe their motivation to undergo Gender Affirmation Surgery as deeply rooted in a desire to align their physical bodies with their gender identity. This motivation is often driven by years of experiencing gender dysphoria, which is caused as a result of prolonged gender incongruence marked by a persistent mismatch between an individual's internal sense of gender and assigned sex, leading to a desire to transition and align one's body with the experienced gender identity (World Health Organization). The perceived necessity of surgery to be seen as 'truly' a woman can create additional pressure.

Transfeminism criticizes this pressure, arguing that trans women should not be forced to undergo medical treatments to "validate" their womanhood and that gender should not be determined by social approval (Koyama, 2003). This critique challenges the medical gatekeeping that routinely manages access to these surgeries, contending that gender identity need not be dependent on surgical alteration. These ideals perpetuate a binary understanding of gender, with surgery viewed as a procedure to achieve authenticity of gender identity rather than a personal option.However, hegemonic femininity, which asserts that the female body must fulfill specific physical requirements, is often the driving force for trans women's decision to have surgery (Butler, 1990).

Decision-making is also determined by intersecting factors such as financial support, improved access to healthcare, emotional preparedness, etc. (Crenshaw, 1989). Most trans women, especially from lower socio-economic classes, are coerced into unsafe, underground surgeries out of financial barriers, which perpetuates the healthcare access disparity. Transfeminism highlights how economic disparity compounds these challenges, as wealthier trans individuals can access private healthcare while poorer trans women are forced

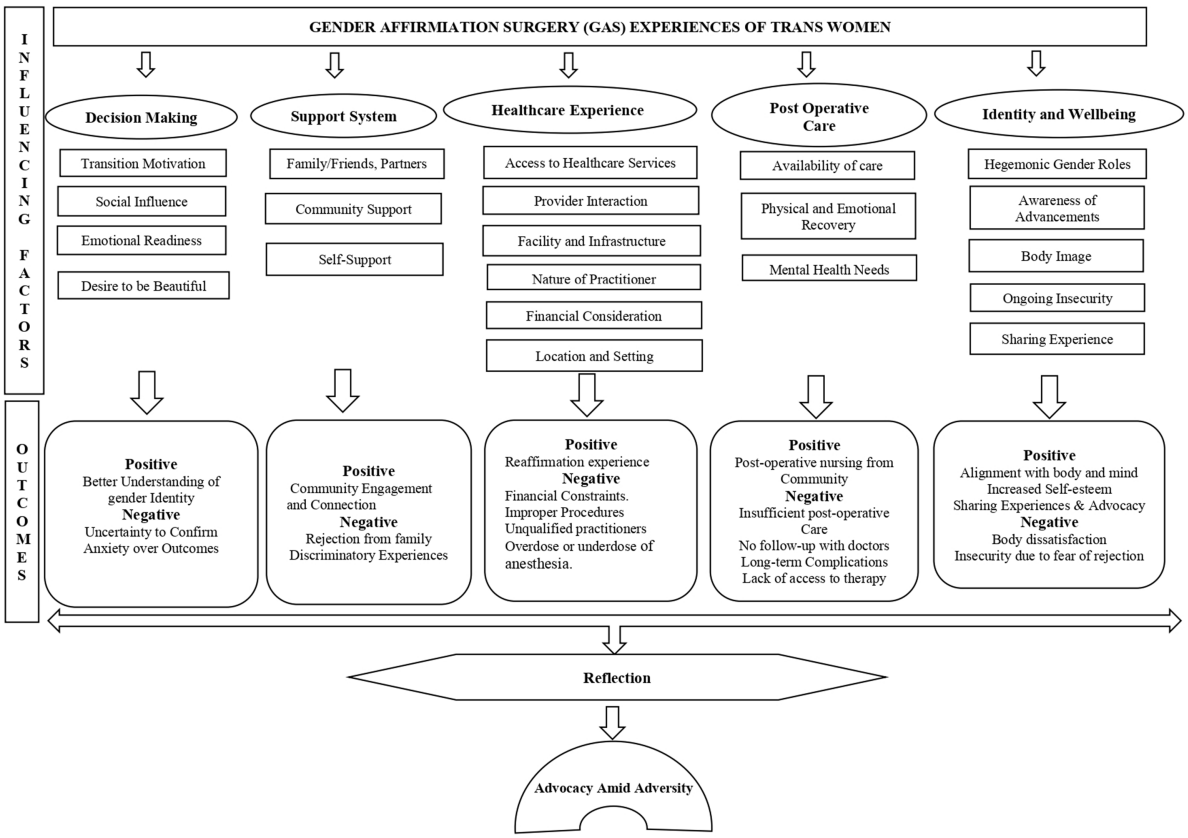

FIGURE 1
Conceptual model of trans women's experiences with Gender Affirmation Surgery.

into unsafe surgical conditions or traditional castration practices (Revathi, 2010).

The lack of a consistent support network made the challenging journey even more difficult and isolating for transwomen pushing them to the 'death world' (Mbembe and Corcoran, 2019) forcing them to a living dead state. Furthermore, the financial burden of Gender Affirmation Surgery is significant, with many trans women struggling to afford the surgery. This factor often delays the decision-making process or compels individuals to seek alternative, sometimes risky methods of surgery.

Emotional readiness is essential for undergoing Gender Affirmation Surgery. Trans women experience fluctuating emotions, including hope, excitement, fear, and anxiety. Unfortunately, many trans women do not have access to pre-surgical counseling due to reasons such as lack of awareness, fear of judgment, and limited resources, including financial constraints, lack of qualified professionals and inadequate healthcare. While many trans women report a better understanding of their gender identity after surgery, the anxiety and uncertainty before the procedure draw attention to the importance of comprehensive pre-surgical counseling and support. Notably, although the decision to undergo surgery is often framed as an act of self-determination, medical institutions exert significant control over trans bodies.

Social support

Support systems are an essential component of the Gender Affirmation Surgery experience for trans women, with community support networks providing emotional and practical support during and after the surgical process. However, limited family support can have serious consequences, including increased emotional distress, financial burdens, and feelings of isolation. In contrast, having a supportive partner can offer significant emotional stability and validation during a challenging transition period. Nevertheless, the persistent social stigma and discrimination against trans women can lead to negative mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety. Transwomen also face difficulties in accessing the medical provisions provided by the state due to stigma and longer waiting hours.

Furthermore, trans women may need to rely on community support to obtain gender affirmation surgery due to financial obstacles and limited access to affordable healthcare, underscoring the necessity of targeted measures to address these systemic inequities. According to Koyama (2003) trans women are more likely to experience violence than non trans women, This is a reflection of the larger failure of cisnormative legal and medical institutions, which continue to marginalize trans bodies and place the burden of care on already vulnerable populations.

Healthcare experience

Accessing gender-affirmation surgery can be a complex and challenging process. Many trans women who choose to undergo surgery at government hospitals often face long waiting times, stigma, and a lack of knowledgeable healthcare providers. However, even

when medical care is accessible, trans women frequently encounter discriminatory treatment from healthcare providers, ranging from verbal abuse to outright denial of care (Atuk, 2024). These barriers can lead to delays in surgery, causing trans women to seek quicker but sub-standard services. The interaction between trans women and healthcare providers can significantly impact the surgical experience. Positive, affirming interactions lead to better outcomes and higher level of satisfaction. Complications of gender-affirmation surgery are both physical and psychological. These can range from surgical complications like urethral stricture and urinary infection to post-surgical depression or anxiety. Proper counseling and follow-up care are essential in alleviating these issues. Transfeminism emphasizes the importance of intersectional care, recognizing how gender identity intersects with other factors to create barriers to accessing holistic, patient-centered care that addresses both physical and emotional well-being.

These barriers in healthcare access point to the need for better access, facilities and enhanced training for healthcare providers to ensure safe and affirming care. Similar instances were recorded worldwide, as Atuk (2024) notes how doctors in Turkey refused to examine or touch trans patients, treating them as contagious rather than individuals in need of medical assistance. Zengin (2016) documented how medical professionals in Turkey perform invasive, humiliating examinations on trans women as a prerequisite for gender recognition. These practices make hospitals into sites where trans bodies are disciplined and regulated rather than healed. Similar patterns of medical scrutiny can be observed in the Indian healthcare system as well.

Post-operative care

Post-operative care is necessary for a successful and complete recovery. However, many trans women face difficulties in accessing this care from their families. Transwomen often seek assistance from other trans women; however, they require adequate finances to afford the same. Gender affirmation surgery recovery involves both physical and emotional processes. Physically, it requires careful pain management, wound care, and management of potential complications. Emotionally, individuals find the process challenging as they adapt to their new bodies and society's reactions to their changed appearance. Mental health support is a vital component of post-operative care as many trans women experience a range of emotions, from relief and joy to dissatisfaction and anxiety. Gender-affirming therapy and support groups can provide essential support during this time. The findings reveal that most of the trans women interviewed have not sought gender-affirming therapy post-surgery. The absence of adequate support during the post-operative period can lead to complications such as urinary tract infections, longer healing times, and in the most serious outcome, the need for re-surgery. Trans women who do not have support from their families, communities, or healthcare providers are more likely to face mental and physical challenges during their transition. Atuk's (2024) findings illustrate how trans women in Turkey, particularly those engaged in sex work, often receive substandard or completely denied surgical care due to medical professionals' biases. Similar experiences exist in India, where trans women report being dismissed or neglected when seeking post-surgical treatment, reinforcing medical institution's involvement in structural violence. Integrated healthcare services that provide continuous support post-surgery are essential to address these needs.

Identity and wellbeing

The impact of Gender affirmation surgery on identity and well-being is profound, with many trans women experiencing increased satisfaction, improved self-esteem, and alignment between body and mind (Park et al., 2022). Overall satisfaction with Gender affirmation surgery varies among trans women, depending on the alignment of expectations and outcomes. Many participants report high levels of satisfaction and relief from gender incongruence, while others struggle with the social repercussions of surgery.

Knowledge of the latest surgical techniques and outcomes plays an important role in decision-making and satisfaction. Trans women who are well-informed about advancements in surgery often feel more empowered and confident in their choices. GAS can significantly impact body image, with many trans women reporting improved self-esteem and confidence. However, some experience ongoing struggles with body image, especially if surgical outcomes do not meet their expectations or due to societal beauty standards. Despite surgery, some trans women continue to experience insecurity, often due to internalized transphobia or personal dissatisfaction with surgical outcomes. These insecurities can affect overall mental health and well-being. Sharing their experiences with others through advocacy, support groups, or public speaking helps many trans women process their journey and contribute to the broader community. This sharing also helps to reduce stigma and raise awareness about the realities of trans experiences.

Transfeminism challenges the discourse surrounding gender affirmation surgery as the purest indicator of "successful" transition, and that one's self-value must not depend on surgical successes or social recognition (Koyama, 2003). Internalized pressure to meet cisnormative ideals of beauty can result in post-surgical discontent, noting the necessity of an expanded definition of gender affirmation that extends beyond medical procedures (Serano, 2007).

Reflection and advocacy amid adversity

Post-surgery reflection often reveals varied emotions and self-realization. Trans women reflect on the changes in their relationships, identity, and the societal reactions they have faced. This process of self-examination and contemplation plays a key role in shaping personal growth, serving as a strong foundation for advocacy. Advocacy for trans rights, improved healthcare access, and social acceptance are integral in addressing the challenges highlighted in this study.

Many trans women who undergo GAS become advocates for better healthcare and social understanding for future generations. Their resilience and determination to improve conditions for others highlight a collective effort to challenge existing barriers and promote trans rights.

Zengin (2016) emphasizes how trans activists resist the medical and legal scrutiny imposed on their bodies, challenging the state's violent intimacy with their gender identities. These struggles resonate with trans women's advocacy efforts in India, where legal victories do not always yield affirming medical care.

Advocacy takes many forms, from personal mentoring to public activism, and is often driven by the adversity they have faced throughout their journey. The experiences of trans women undergoing GAS in Chennai reveal both significant progress and challenges. A more inclusive and supportive healthcare system and society could be attained by empowering their voices. The study supports the need for positive health care for trans women devoid of discrimination and stigmatization. Advocacy efforts emphasize the need for a comprehensive, inclusive approach to support trans women undergoing gender affirmation surgery (Oles et al., 2022).

The findings indicate dichotomous responses because GAS is presented as a liberating experience for gender affirmation, but the process of undergoing it through force/coercion (Participant 2) and inadequate or no aftercare (Participant 9) reveals how cisnormative systems base treatment on conformity, which questions SDG 3's goal of "health for all." However, the advocacy of the participant (for example, Participant 10's call for "proper representation") is a prime example of transfeminist resistance to reclaim autonomy in the face of institutional ignorance and harm.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the greater discourse of research by documenting the lived experiences, agency and resilience of trans women in Chennai who have undergone various forms of gender-affirming procedures. While much of the existing scholarship focuses on the medical, psychological and legal aspects of gender transition, this study builds the gap by placing gender affirmation within a socio-cultural framework, especially through traditional castration by Thayamma within trans women community, informal surgical procedures in unauthorized clinics and hospital-based gender affirmation surgery.

The results emphasize the importance of pre-surgical counselling, support systems and access to qualified healthcare practitioners. Persistent barriers such as financial constraints, discrimination, and inadequate post-operative care reiterate the urgent need for policy reforms. This study emphasizes the resilience of trans women and the crucial role of advocacy in their journey, calling for trans-competent healthcare training for practitioners, gender-affirming care to support trans women without discrimination or stigmatization and calls for policy reforms and mental health funding. These steps help advance sustainable development goals, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). United Nations (2015) advocating more equitable healthcare services centering on the lived experiences of transwomen. By bringing attention to non-western, community-specific gender practices, this research provides a critical narrative to dominant global perspectives on trans healthcare and identity formation. It offers insights that intersect with larger discourses on gender, identity, and community-driven advocacy, reinforcing the need for trans-inclusive policies and scholarly engagement.

Limitations of the study

Future quantitative studies could be undertaken to address measurable outcomes such as post-surgical satisfaction, which is the limitation of the current study. This study exclusively focuses on trans women and hence does not capture the experiences of trans men or non-binary individuals, which could be a scope for future research.

Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the study and participants privacy, the raw data of this article cannot be made publicly available. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The study received ethical clearance from Institutional Ethical Committee for studies on Human Subjects (ICEH) Ref. No.VIT/ICEH/CC/2024/52. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SD: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BS: Funding acquisition, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Iconoclasm of normative structures: exploring queer ageing in "*Kaathal: The core*" by Jeo Baby

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Introduction: This research critically examined the portrayal of older gay men through an iconoclastic perspective in the Malayalam film *"Kaathal: The core,"* directed by Jeo Baby, focusing on the intersecting identities of age, marriage, and homosexuality as depicted in the film, further exploring how these overlapping facets shape the characters' lives and experiences.

Methodology: A qualitative research approach was employed to examine the representation of older gay men in the film. The study focused on narrative analysis of key scenes, dialogues, character portrayals, and cinematic elements to explore how the intersection of age, sexuality, and cultural norms is depicted.

Results: The film narrative explored the challenging circumstances faced by the older gay characters, Mathew Devasy and Thankan, within a heteronormative cultural framework, particularly as of those who stay mute on their identity, remaining isolated and vulnerable. The research discloses the hetero character Omana's display of significant agency, challenging traditional views on family and belonging.

Discussion: The film critiques the rigid heteronormative framework of traditional family structures, offering alternative perspectives through non-traditional kinship and support systems. By addressing the intersection of age, sexuality, and cultural norms, this research emphasizes the importance of expanding queer representation to include diverse identities and life stages, paving the way for more inclusive cinematic discourses.

KEYWORDS

queer, ageing, male homosexuality, gerontology, iconoclastic

1 Introduction

Cinema has become a significant part of humanity and existence in popular culture. It portrays the differences in shifting public lifestyles, varying in social, political and cultural norms. It occupies and even alters the behavior, and belief systems of the common audience. Indian cinema, though existing for more than a century, is still hesitant, in the expression of queer people on screen. Though it was gradual, the evolution of portraying the community as a comical figure, or as a subject of ridicule has improved to sensitive narrations in the contemporary times demanding maturity and respect in the matter among the citizens. Despite the recent decriminalization of Section 377, by the Supreme Court, a British colonial penal code, that criminalized all sexual acts "against the order of nature," there are still doors to be unlocked and milestones to be accomplished in the concerns of the community, regarding social, political, and legal. Cinema as a tool of artistic expression has been an

influencing factor among general viewers both optimistically and at times, producing challenging realities, making screen space utilization on improving the quality of people's lives equally important as commercial entertainment. Among the four major film industries of Indian cinema, Bollywood, Kollywood, Mollywood, and Tollywood, the least involvement in establishing queer visibility in mainstream movies is the Malayalam film industry. Ageism, like sexism and racism is as a systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against people because they are older. I see ageism manifested in a wide range of phenomena, on both individual and institutional levels - stereotypes and myths, outright disdain and dislike, simple subtle avoidance of contact, and discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and services of all kinds (Qtd. in Butler 1989, p. 139). Ageism, as Judith Butler, an American feminist philosopher and gender studies scholar, observes, that the non-normative, vis-à-vis youth society is largely structured on the assumption that the majority is not older. But it is important to note that ageing is a universal process. While ageism can be linked to racism, sexism, or homophobia, unlike the latter, it affects everybody, regardless of class, caste, race, ethnicity, and gender or sexual identity. Therefore, the "aged" cannot be an exclusive identity or demographic category (Paromita and Kaustav, 2024). Ageing is shaped by diverse factors such as sexuality, gender identity, socio-economic status, cultural norms, etc (Wikipedia Contributors, 2025). These intersecting identities create varied ageing experiences, with some individuals facing heightened social and emotional challenges. Mainstream narratives, however, often depict ageing as a universal process, focusing on physical decline and life reflection while overlooking the unique struggles of marginalized groups. Older LGBTQ+ individuals may encounter isolation, discrimination, and unresolved identity conflicts, making their experiences distinct from conventional ageing narratives. This highlights the need for more inclusive portrayals that reflect the complexities of queer ageing.

Although representation of queer lives has gained visibility over time, accounts of elderly gay men remain underrepresented which makes it difficult to fully appreciate the subset of queer experience that is ageing. Existing not only in the Indian Diasporic imagination but also in American mainstream and regional narratives, older queer figures are often rendered invisible, or shown as elderly, single people without sexual/racial agency. It is argued that this neglect is not just a deficit but also a type of stereotyping that poor representation of older LGTBQ+ people is an understated premise and dominance in LGBT relations is assigned to youth only (Ferrer C., 2017; Ferrer J., 2017). In culturally conservative societies rooted in heteronormative ideas like India, older queer people must juggle between adhering to familial ties and accepting their sexual identity. Clearly there is a need to question the simple "adding in" of gay and lesbian identities as if they are "just another" cultural group (Hicks and Watson, 2003). Hence, the irony of older gay men being left out of the social and romantic scenes must be addressed. It is argued that a queer ageing approach would encounter older people not just as bodies with sexual needs, but also as erotic beings with diverse sexualities to be celebrated and desired (Hughes, 2006). They are frequently subjected to social isolation, hyper sexualization, or invisibility, causing considerable difficulty in social interactions or dating. Older queer individuals do not only share the experience of ageism, as seniors, Judith Butler noted that they face unique social discrimination over their sexual identity as well (Butler, 1980). Ageing may witness numerous changes for queer elderly; however, to be older and queer is another fraught identity, especially from regions characterized by conservative parameters. In India, a country that remains entrenched in social conservatism, the themes of queer elders are largely neglected, notwithstanding the country's architectural situations that lend themselves to radical transgressive populations such as queer persons. Jeo Baby, the director of *"Kaathal: The core,"* offers scenes that allow viewers to appreciate multiple facets of older gay men, including their emotional and sociocultural environments, especially that of a sexually suppressed married man. This is potentially diametrically opposed to stereotypes in popular media that associate queerness with youth and rebellion. At the convergence of gerontology and queer theory, this paper looks at the question of how *"Kaathal: The core"* depicts the realities of senior homosexual men within their families and their conservative Kerala culture. It looks at how these characters can cope with their queer selves as they experience the process of ageing and abiding to social standards and expectations, to argue how Indian screen narratives might subvert stereotypes about queer confessors, thus allowing discussions of visibility, relational power and sexual freedom of older queers. Also, it considers how the value systems promoted by the family, placing heterosexual norms at their core, are detrimental to older homosexual men's self-representation and expression in cinema, thereby forcing them into a silent or sterilized position. In this way, this study contributes to the current debate about the relationship between age and queerness and the emerging campaigns in the UK and the US promoting more intersectional approaches to LGBTQ narratives in Indian cinema. In India after the decriminalization of homosexuality, in 2018, the representation of queer themes in films and literature began to grow, but quite slowly" (Johar, 2018). The invisibility of elder queer figures leads not only to the silencing of their stories but also the false impression that queer life does not extend beyond the youth infusion hence, skipping the natural history of queer identity as a sum of (Browne and Nash, 2010). For most of them, senescence adds further dimensions of social disinvestment and family expectation to the complexities of queer identity, especially in cultures where heterosexuality and bearing children are considered essential to family and community inclusion (Suh and Son, 2020).

2 Review of literature

Queer aging, an integral aspect of queer studies, remains less explored in both academic, research and cultural representations, particularly in the context of male homosexuality. While contemporary discourses on queer identities have gradually gained visibility, the focus has predominantly rested on younger individuals, often aligning narratives with themes of self-discovery, coming-of-age, or romantic relationships. This skewed representation perpetuates the marginalization of older queer individuals, leaving their experiences, emotions, and identities largely invisible. The portrayal of ageing gay men in Indian cinema reflects this imbalance, where the narrative lens seldom shifts beyond youthful explorations of identity. In rare instances where older queer characters are depicted, they are frequently framed within stereotypes of isolation, deviance, or sexualization, effectively rendering their lived realities peripheral to the central narrative. This gap in representation and analysis overlooks the intersectionality of ageing and queerness, particularly the emotional and social complexities faced by older gay men in societies deeply entrenched in heteronormative and patriarchal structures (Bose, 2009). Conventional

gerontological studies tend to emphasize a sex decline or absence of sexual desire or relational needs in older adults (Calasanti and Slevin, 2006). This is particularly the case for queer people, for whom the performance of desire, wanting, or having relationships can already be contentious. For older gay men in the Indian context, this dual invisibility, of being elderly and queer, exposes them to prospects of experiencing social and romantic lives, which leads to a kind of "double alienation" (Butler, 1980). The idea of mobility through space and time brings in coordination and structure to the sound lives of gay men, and age can be an aspect towards this (Pullen, 2012). Therefore, this study places *"Kaathal: The core"* in specificity to gerontological discourse and describes it as a cultural text that explores male homosexuality as an essential or a basic unit useful for analysis as opposed to being related. Their lives reflect the very quiet struggles and resilience of older queer individuals who have managed to "live quiet lives" and "discrete LGBT lives" taking care of family first (Hicks and Lee, 2006). Such characters also serve to challenge the norms of the Indian society that views elderly adults as not being sexual beings, with most of the gay stereotypes focusing on married couples, especially Indians. This analysis acknowledges that emphasis on families of older queer individuals in the media has been a strike against ageing invisibility that seeks to erase such constructs. Such analysis seeks to undermine the notion that *"Kaathal: The core"* is somehow a progressive film for Indian cinema, it discusses the much broader issues relating to intersectional inclusivity in India, particularly how the older population is integrated into the activism space and campaigns, societal perceptions, post legalization of gay marriage. Slowly, over the years western culture began to influence the media and decrease the viable hyper masculinity portrayal of queers, increasing visibility, and providing representation for more complex queer characters in media (Nicolazzo, 2021). However, such a visibility level has not been reciprocated to the older LGBTQ population (Sen, 2016). Violence against older LGBTQ people can be over-ridden by the sense of emotional belonging and relatedness to core supportive queer family units not based on conventional definitions of family, which the film explains. Unlike in Indian society however, avunculate attachments or more informal constellations known as the homosexual brotherhood as referred to by Loren P. Beth have emerged for older queer Indians as lifelines gained out of such oppression (Weston, 1991). *"Kaathal: The core"* thus prompts concerns relating to the negotiability and the creativity of a queer person's neighborhood in a context where they are immersed in a more conventional family setting. Rather than focusing on coming out as the primary narrative when studying the lives of older gay men, this research elevates the longitudinal diversity of queer lives as projected by *"Kaathal: The core."* It is vital to enhance the understanding of sexuality, identity, and psychocultural integration of a family unit by adding another dimension of expanding the horizon of LGBTQ+ representation to include older age queerness in Indian cinematic discourses. This way, older adolescents who are queer are not left out of the understanding and appreciation of queer culture as this allows for a deeper understanding of them, as "queer" known to be a more civil and well-mannered term and society's view towards them (Chatterjee, 2020). The movie emerges as a critical text in addressing the underrepresentation of queer ageing in Indian cinema. The film ventures into themes of societal conformity, familial obligations, and the suppressed identities of older gay men, offering a lens through which to interrogate the interplay between aging and queer identity. Through the character of Mathew Devasy, *Kaathal: The core* explores the challenges of navigating a queer identity in the later stages of life within the confines of a traditional family structure dominated by heteronormative values. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of gerontology and queer studies, this study examines how the film situates aging gay men as complex, multi-dimensional individuals, contrasting the erasure and invisibility often observed in cinematic portrayals. Furthermore, it critiques the impact of societal expectations, internalized shame, and cultural taboos on the emotional, sexual, and social lives of older gay men. By delving into the intersections of age and queerness, the study underscores the urgent need for nuanced narratives that go beyond youth-centric depictions of queer experiences and contribute to a broader understanding of the diversity within LGBTQ+ communities. This analysis situates the film as a significant cultural text that challenges dominant ideologies and invites discourse on the experiences of older queer individuals, particularly in conservative socio-cultural contexts. The film bridges the themes of gerontology, queer ageing, and iconoclasm by presenting ageing not as a limitation but as a site of resilience and redefinition for queer individuals. While gerontology often frames older adults as desexualized or socially disengaged, *Kaathal: The core* resists this narrative, highlighting how older gay men carve spaces for emotional and sexual fulfillment within restrictive societal frameworks (Hicks and Lee, 2006). The film's iconoclastic approach reshapes the cultural imagination of ageing and queerness, advocating for more inclusive narratives that celebrate diversity across all life stages.

3 Research gap

3.1 Underrepresentation of older queer narratives in Indian cinema

While queer representation has improved post-decriminalization of Section 377, narratives focusing on older LGBTQ+ individuals remain scarce. Indian cinema predominantly portrays queer identities through the lens of youth, often ignoring the experiences of ageing queer individuals. *Kaathal: The core* provides a rare exception, highlighting the lack of focus on older queer lives in cinematic storytelling.

3.2 Lack of intersectional analysis in queer ageing

Existing literature often studies queer identity and ageing in isolation, failing to address how intersecting factors like age, gender, sexuality, and cultural context compound the challenges faced by older LGBTQ+ individuals. The intersectional experiences of older queer men in conservative, heteronormative societies like Kerala have not been adequately explored.

3.3 Overlooked iconoclasm in queer representation

Few studies explore how films like *Kaathal: The core* challenge and disrupt traditional narratives surrounding ageing, queerness, and family structures. This lack of focus undermines the potential for

broader discussions on the resilience and agency of older queer individuals in conservative settings.

Despite the growing presence of queer narratives in Indian cinema, older LGBTQ+ individuals remain significantly underrepresented, with most portrayals fixated on youthful experiences. This absence marginalizes the realities of queer ageing, reinforcing the misconception that queerness is exclusive to youth. By examining *Kaathal: The core*, this study addresses this gap, demonstrating how the film highlights the emotional, social, and familial struggles faced by ageing queer individuals, particularly within Kerala's conservative setting. Furthermore, existing scholarship often isolates queer identity and ageing, overlooking the compounded challenges faced by individuals who navigate both.

4 Methods

The researchers employed qualitative research methodology, and narrative analysis was utilized to examine important scenes, character development, and dialogues that dealt with and focused on the representation and experiences of older queer individuals, thus addressing the research question of how the film *Kaathal: The core* depict the intersection of age, queerness, and cultural conservatism in the lives of older gay men, further dealing with what this representation reveal about the challenges of queer ageing in Indian society.

4.1 Enhanced methodological approach

The film was viewed multiple times to develop an in-depth understanding of its narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements. Film transcripts, including dialogues, were transcribed and reviewed to capture both explicit and implicit messages. Each segment was coded based on recurring themes such as "Queer Invisibility," "Familial Conflict," "Iconoclasm," and "Emotional Isolation." Codes were grouped under broader thematic categories such as "Intersectionality in Queer Ageing," "Legal and Cultural Resistance," and "Emotional Consequences of Silence." Visual elements such as body language, facial expressions, camera angles, and mise-en-scène were analyzed to uncover deeper emotional and psychological dimensions. For instance, the use of dim lighting in certain scenes, the religious chants, and confined spaces of home and church was interpreted as a visual metaphor. By implementing this structured analytical process, the study ensured a systematic exploration of the film's narrative complexities, visual language, and cultural commentary.

4.2 Materials

The primary data source for this study is the film *Kaathal: The core*, directed by Jeo Baby. The film has been analyzed in its entirety, focusing on key scenes, dialogue, and character interactions that highlight the experiences of ageing gay men within their social and familial contexts. Specific scenes that reveal tensions between the characters' queer identity and traditional family structures has been analyzed closely, as they serve as focal points for understanding how intersectional identities manifest within the film's narrative. In addition to the film, secondary sources including critical reviews, and existing scholarship on queer representation in Indian cinema are referenced to contextualize the findings and thus reinforce the analysis.

4.3 Procedure

Narrative analysis was employed as the primary qualitative method to explore the representation of older gay men in *Kaathal: The core*. The procedure for analyzing the film was adapted from established methods in cinematic narrative studies, where the film was viewed multiple times to identify key themes and data points relevant to the research question. Both visual elements, such as the characters' body language and positioning within family settings, and verbal elements, including key dialogues, were carefully analyzed. The speech was transcribed, and subtitles were used to ensure precision in capturing the film's implicit and explicit messages. This combination of visual and verbal data allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced representation of older gay men in the film, providing critical insights into their negotiation of identity, agency, and belonging within a conservative cultural framework.

The film engages with gerontological and queer theories by addressing themes of invisibility, repression, and resilience. The film reflects gerontological concerns highlighted by Hughes (2006) and de Vries et al. (2013), who emphasize the "double marginalization" faced by older LGBTQ+ individuals. Mathew's concealed identity aligns with Westwood's (2016) concept of the "silent generation," where older queer individuals suppress their identities to survive in conservative societies. While reinforcing this invisibility, the film also challenges it by depicting Mathew's eventual confession and Omana's decision to divorce, reflecting Minichiello (2015) view that older queer individuals negotiate their identities through quiet acts of defiance. Drawing from Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, the film illustrates how Mathew performs heterosexuality to meet societal expectations, while Sedgwick's (1990) theory of the closet is reflected in Mathew's prolonged silence and the emotional toll it exacts. By embedding these struggles within Kerala's cultural framework, the film aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory, showing how age, sexuality, and cultural pressures compound marginalization (Sharma and Samanta, 2020). Ultimately, the film blends elements of repression, visibility, and resilience, offering a layered critique of queer ageing within a regional Indian context.

5 Findings

The research reveals the evolution of queer representation in Malayalam cinema, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges. The analysis of *Kaathal: The core* alongside an examination of LGBTQ+ portrayals in Malayalam cinema, demonstrates the growing willingness of filmmakers to address the complexities of queer lives, albeit unevenly across decades. The findings in Figure 1, show that early portrayals, such as in Rendu Penkuttikal (1978) and Desatakkili Karayarilla (1986), were subtle and coded, reflecting the cultural and societal limitations of their time. These films cautiously hinted at queer themes without overt acknowledgment, allowing them to exist within conservative cinematic spaces while opening the door for future narratives. The shift in the 2000s, marked by films like Sancharam

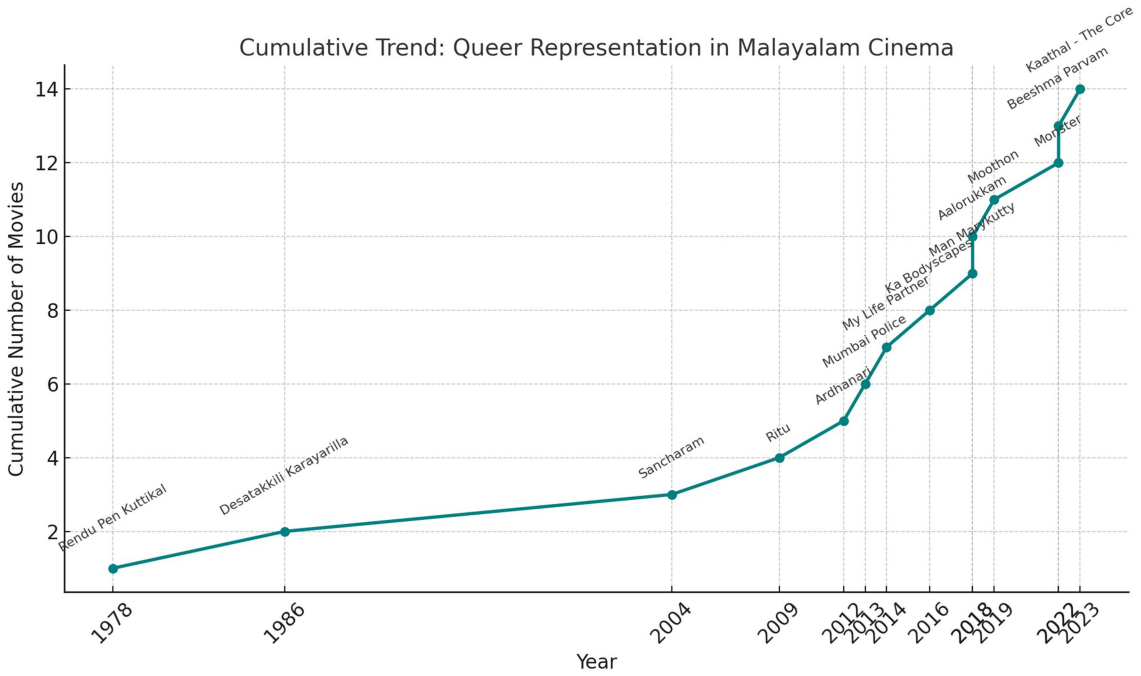

FIGURE 1
Queer representation in Malayalam cinema.

(2004) and Ritu (2009), presented more explicit queer stories, though they often fell into tragic tropes. Sancharam, with its positive depiction of a sapphic relationship, offered an affirming narrative, while Ritu and others of the period reflected societal stigma, often ending in heartbreak or punishment for queer characters. In the 2010s, a broader and more diverse range of narratives began to emerge. Films like Mumbai Police (2013) explored the intersection of queer identity and professional life, while Njan Marykutty (2018) and Aalorukkam (2018) brought attention to transgender lives, showcasing resilience against societal and familial rejection (The Indian Express, 2018). However, even during this period, films like My Life Partner (2014) and Ka Bodyscapes (2016) illustrated the ongoing struggle against stereotypes and the censorship of queer content in regional cinema. The 2020s signify a notable increase in queer representation, both in volume and diversity (India Today, 2019). Films like Moothon (2019), Monster (2022), and Beeshma Parvam (2022) reflect attempts to integrate LGBTQ+ themes into mainstream Malayalam cinema, though not all succeed in breaking away from harmful stereotypes. *Kaathal: The core* (2023) stands out for its bolder exploration of queer ageing, a largely neglected topic. By focusing on older gay men and their struggles within a conservative societal framework, the film addresses the compounded marginalization caused by age, sexuality, and cultural expectations.

This analysis underscores the evolution of queer representation in Malayalam cinema, revealing that while progress has been made in bringing LGBTQ+ lives into the spotlight, significant gaps remain. Tragic endings, stereotypical depictions, and an overreliance on implicit portrayals highlight the need for more nuanced and intersectional narratives (Financial Express, 2018). The research further emphasizes the importance of exploring overlooked topics, such as queer ageing and the lived experiences of individuals navigating non-heteronormative identities in conservative societies. Films like *Kaathal: The core* represent a critical step forward, advocating for inclusivity and visibility in cinematic storytelling.

6 Analysis

The choice of narrative analysis in this study is particularly justified due to its ability to examine the intricate emotional, social, and cultural layers present in *Kaathal: The Core*. Unlike other qualitative methods such as thematic analysis or ethnography, narrative analysis is uniquely suited to dissect the film's complex storytelling structure, character development, and visual language. Moreover, narrative analysis aligns with the study's intersectional approach, as it enables the identification of layered identities and social hierarchies embedded in the film's storytelling. Further, the film's focus on the nuanced experiences of older gay men navigating familial expectations, social stigma, and internalized shame, makes narrative analysis particularly effective, allowing for a deeper exploration of how these themes are constructed and communicated.

6.1 Enhanced interpretive depth through cinematic techniques

By integrating cinematography, lighting, and body language into the thematic analysis, this study uncovers deeper layers of meaning that reinforce the emotional struggles faced by older queer individuals.

6.1.1 Cinematography and spatial framing

The film frequently utilizes tight framing and close-up shots to capture Mathew's internalized tension and emotional confinement.

For instance, during Mathew's moments of introspection, the camera focuses closely on his face, emphasizing his anxiety and the burden of living a concealed identity. These visual choices mirror the suffocating effect of social expectations and reinforce the theme of emotional isolation. In the scenes featuring Mathew and Thankan, the camera employs over-the-shoulder shots to frame their unspoken conversations. This technique places viewers in a voyeuristic position, symbolizing the pervasive social surveillance that controls their identities and actions.

6.1.2 Lighting and symbolic contrast

The film's deliberate use of low lighting and shadows emphasizes the tension between concealment and exposure. For example, the climax scene where Mathew confesses his apology to Omana and breaking down to his father before, unfolds in dim lighting, with shadows partially obscuring his face. This visual metaphor reflects the emotional weight of his hidden identity and underscores the theme of shame and secrecy. In contrast, brighter lighting is reserved for moments of social conformity—such as Mathew's political campaign scenes—symbolizing the pressure to maintain a respectable public image. This contrast between dark and illuminated spaces reinforces the protagonist's inner conflict.

6.1.3 Body language and emotional suppression

Throughout the film, Mathew's restrained gestures and averted eye contact highlight his discomfort and fear of exposure. His rigid posture during interactions with Thankan reflects the internalized shame and the anxiety of being scrutinized. In key scenes, such as Mathew's political address or Omana's confrontation, his stiff body language contrasts with Omana's expressive movements, symbolizing her growing agency as she challenges patriarchal norms.

6.1.4 Sound design and emotional undercurrents

The film's restrained use of background music emphasizes moments of silence, creating an atmosphere of tension and emotional vulnerability. For example, in the rain-soaked car scene where Thankan reflects on his unspoken love, the absence of dialogue paired with ambient sounds amplifies his emotional turmoil, reinforcing the theme of love lost to societal constraints.

6.2 Iconoclasm and the politics of marriage, sexuality, and identity

According to Butler, the notion of gender is a construct of the society, where people (especially the queer communities) struggle to meet the set standards of gender roles, fearing getting pushed out from the mainstream. Prajoth and Priya (2024). They are in a way, strained to become or perform as another person to overcome the title of being an outcast, other type, inferior, etc. Tacium (1993). A misconception about sexuality has been built that "heterosexuality is natural." This cultural construct, utterly excludes queer identities, be it, artistic, literary or political. As Eve Sedwick explains in the "Epistemology of the closet," when two elements of conflict always coexist, which are not of equal powers, one oppresses the other, whereas queer identity politics challenges this, opposing the ideas imposed and the social construct. This power play demands an oppressor and an oppressed. The sympathy shown by the hetero public towards the queer minority, is a prevailing problem (Warner, 1999). Postmodern narratives have taught us to fight conflicts and grand narratives, thus paving way for equalizing this powerplay, eliminating the need to express superiority over the other. This sympathy trend is visible in many contemporary films. Amidst such narrations, offering fresh perspective on the lived experiences of older gay men is *Kaathal: The core* directed by Jeo Baby starring Mammootty as Mathew Devasy and Jyothika as Omana Philip Mathew. The plot develops as Mammootty embarks on a political journey as left-wing independent candidate in the election. The film subtly raises questions on what it means to grow older as a queer person in a culture where queerness remains a taboo, particularly in the context of a late-life companionship, loneliness, and societal erasure of queer identities. The film establishes subtle yet powerful undercurrents that reflect the experiences of older queer individuals, especially of those who oblige to societal standards of heteronormativity. Coming out of the closet is a traumatic experience in the life of gay individuals as the fear of ostracization may at times force them to try to behave "normal." In this pursuit, most of them face extreme identity crisis as they find themselves enmeshed in the quagmire of meaningless marriage associations, emotional havoc, mental instability, suicidal thoughts and ultimately the unrepresentable pain of negotiating oneself, beyond every other suffering. Prajoth and Priya (2024). The courtroom scene in *Kaathal: The core* serves as a profound commentary on iconoclasm, particularly through the character of Omana's lawyer Ameera, who challenges the entrenched societal norms surrounding marriage, sexuality, and gender norms. The lawyer's argument directly critiques the longstanding cultural ideologies that have kept LGBTQ+ individuals, and their heterosexual spouses bound within the same oppressive framework, rendering them powerless to challenge the status quo. By calling attention to the pervasive silence forced upon women and marginalized communities, the scene subtly dismantles these traditional structures, aligning with an iconoclastic approach to social norms and legal systems.

Lawyer Ameera. The women of our society still do not have the luxury of choice, to come out of their families and take their own stand (Baby, 2023, 01:11:59).

Iconoclasm, traditionally seen as the act of destroying or challenging established traditions and values, takes on a unique form in this narrative. The lawyer's reference to the decriminalization of Section 377 serves as a symbolic act of defiance against not just the law itself but also the centuries-older patriarchal ideologies that have long governed Indian society. The idea that Omana must wait for the legal system to change before she can take control of her life speaks about the power dynamics, in the place. It's an ironic reflection on how, to assert personal freedom, individuals must often first seek legal validation from systems that have historically oppressed them.

Lawyer Ameera. And, if you ask why she took this long, let me remind you it was only last year that Section 377 was decriminalized. Suppose Omana had gone ahead with such a case before that as per then existing law, Mathew would have considered engaging in a criminal offence. If not anything, she must have been aware that her husband is not a criminal. And this lady had to wait until 2018. Just because we had such a law in our country (Baby, 2023, 01:12:13).

The lawyer's quoting of Justice Malhotra's words while passing the decriminalization verdict, "History owes an apology to the members of this community" (Baby, 2023, 01:12:40), are not only a critique of the legal system but a challenge to the social norms that have long marginalized both queer individuals and their spouses. Furthermore,

the lawyer's invocation of the statistic about the high number of queer individuals married to straight partners, "more than 80% of homosexuals are married to a straight partner," highlights the societal pressure to conform the heteronormative ideals. This powerful statistic becomes a critique of the institution of marriage itself, showing how deeply ingrained cultural norms have forced queer individuals to hide their identities and live in relationships that are often emotionally suffocating. The film, through this scene, critiques the very idea of marriage and challenges the role it plays in maintaining heteronormative standards. Omana's decision to divorce, after years of enduring this oppressive silence, is nothing short of iconoclastic. It represents a breaking away from traditional marital expectations and a call for societal transformation, where personal freedom and authenticity are not constrained by legal or cultural boundaries. The scene ultimately contributes to a larger conversation about how breaking societal norms, particularly those related to marriage and gender, can be seen as an act of resistance. In this context, Omana's divorce is not just an emotional decision, but an iconoclastic stand against a society that continues to enforce conformity, at the cost of hiding the fact. By making this decision, Omana is not only reclaiming her own life but is also calling attention to the oppressive structures that govern the lives of both LGBTQ+ individuals and those, they are entwined with. Thus, this moment in the film transcends the personal, serving as a critique of larger societal and cultural systems, urging a rethinking of traditional views on family, marriage, and identity.

6.3 The burden of silence: cost of authenticity in queer lives

The experiences of older gay men in conservative societies like Kerala reveal how deeply entrenched societal norms weaponize shame and ridicule to enforce conformity and silence. In *Kaathal: The core*, these dynamics are poignantly portrayed through characters like Mathew and Thankan, whose emotional, sexual, and social lives are shaped by a culture that refuses to acknowledge or validate their identities. The politics of shame becomes a powerful tool to marginalize older queer individuals, rendering them invisible in public spaces while deeply isolating them in private. The scene where Thankan and his nephew Kuttayi are mocked by random men on the street, "Hey, Thankan. Let the boy ride the bike. And you sit at the back. That will be convenient for you" (Baby, 2023, 00:39:18) is a stark depiction of how societal ridicule eroding the dignity and authenticity of queer individuals in public spaces. The casual tone of the taunt reflects the ingrained nature of societal prejudice, where non-conformity to heteronormative ideals is seen as a subject of humor and derision. It exemplifies how public spaces are often weaponized against queer individuals. For older gay men like Thankan, this ridicule is not just an insult but a reminder of their societal erasure. It underscores the collective discomfort with their visibility, particularly because they challenge heteronormative narratives that equate age with sexualization and conformity to traditional family roles. Thankan's silent response to the mockery reflects the emotional toll of enduring such humiliation, where dignity is sacrificed for survival in a judgmental world. This scene is a microcosm of the daily humiliation endured by queer individuals like Thankan, who must carry the burden of silence to protect themselves from overt marginalization and violence. Mathew's reluctance to separate from Omana is not driven solely by love or partnership but by the societal pressures that bind him to his role as a husband, father, and public figure. In a deeply patriarchal and heteronormative society like Kerala, marriage is often seen as a sacred institution that validates a man's masculinity, respectability, and place within the family unit. For Mathew, stepping away from this institution would mean not just personal loss but also societal scrutiny, shame, and the erosion of his carefully constructed identity as a family man and political candidate. This fear of societal judgment is so pervasive that it compels him to sacrifice his true self in favor of a life marked by compromise and concealment. This is evident in the scene, Mathew. I… do not want to get separated from Omana" (Baby, 2023, 00:44:40). The scene poignantly captures how societal norms can imprison individuals, pushing them to sustain relationships that ultimately deny them the dignity of living as their true selves. It reveals how societal expectations force queer individuals to prioritize appearances over authenticity. For Mathew, the fear of losing familial and social acceptance outweighs his desire to live truthfully. The internalized shame of being unable to reconcile his public and private selves leads to emotional fragmentation, where his sexual and emotional needs are repressed to maintain societal validation. Shame also acts as a barrier to intimacy and self-expression, particularly for older gay men navigating their sexual lives. In societies that stigmatize queerness, expressions of love and desire are often ridiculed or deemed inappropriate, especially for individuals who do not conform to conventional notions of youth and attractiveness. Thankan's grief, captured in the rain-soaked car scene, reflects not only the pain of unspoken love but also the societal rejection that has forced him to suppress his desires. The inability to express or act on these emotions without fear of ridicule or rejection highlights the heavy cost of shame on the sexual lives of older queer individuals. By intertwining the struggles of Mathew, Thankan, and Omana, the film critiques the oppressive structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy, exposing the emotional toll of conformity and inauthenticity.

6.4 Morality, marginalization, and resistance: the role of church and community in *Kaathal: The core*

The intersection of the church, community, and societal structures plays a central role in *Kaathal: The core*, revealing how deeply entrenched cultural and religious values govern personal and public lives, especially for queer individuals and their families. The film portrays the church and the community not as spaces of support or compassion but as institutions that weaponize morality, shame, and conformity to marginalize those who deviate from heteronormative norms. Omana's brother's reaction to her decision to file for divorce encapsulates the community's patriarchal and moralistic stance on marriage. His statement, "Such trivial issues are normal in family life" (Baby, 2023, 00:25:53), dismisses Omana's grievances as insignificant, undermining her autonomy and right to seek a fulfilling life. The suggestion that divorces at her age would scandalize the family, reveals how community reputation, rather than individual wellbeing, is prioritized. By framing Omana's actions as a threat to her daughter Femi's marital prospects, the brother uses shame as a tool to silence her, reinforcing the patriarchal control exerted by both family and community. The role of the church is equally complicit in perpetuating

stigma and exclusion. The scene of the prayer, "O virgin of virgins, O merciful mother. Despite not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me" (Baby, 2023, 00:28:23) highlights the performative religiosity embedded in the community. This prayer, invoking mercy and compassion, is starkly contrasted by the church committee's decision to expel Mathew from the parish, "Whatever it is, among the believers in the parish, it has become a talk" (Baby, 2023, 00:57:30) Instead of offering understanding or acceptance, the church becomes a moral authority that ostracizes individuals like Mathew, enforcing rigid notions of purity and propriety that leave no space for queer identities. The political community, too, plays a significant role in reinforcing societal stigma. When Mathew's homosexuality becomes public knowledge, his party members express concern over its potential impact on the party's image, "No one from a pious Christian family will vote for us."

Despite their proclaimed ideology of respecting individual integrity, "Our ideology is such that we respect the integrity and identity of an individual (Baby, 2023, 00:32:44). This acceptance remains superficial, as it is quickly overridden by the fear of losing votes and public support. The opposite party's campaign against Mathew amplifies this prejudice, framing his candidacy as a moral threat, "What influence will this create on our kids? Can you imagine the situation of our land if he becomes the Panchayath member?" (Baby, 2023, 00:35:35). These reactions reveal the political community's complicity in perpetuating societal homophobia, using morality as a weapon to delegitimize queer individuals in public spaces. The film also depicts how ridicule and public humiliation are employed to enforce conformity. The men mocking Thankan in the streets, "Let the boy ride the bike, and you sit at the back. That will be convenient for you" (Baby, 2023, 00:39:18) reflect the community's casual cruelty towards those who deviate from traditional gender and sexual norms. This ridicule not only isolates Thankan but also reinforces his invisibility within the larger social structure. Similarly, Mathew's lawyer highlights the lack of legal frameworks to address such cases in Kerala, "There are not many cases or laws for us to refer to" (Baby, 2023, 00:42:14), revealing the systemic neglect and marginalization of queer individuals in both legal and social institutions. Omana's lawyer sheds further light on the societal pressures that force queer individuals into heterosexual marriages, "Many homosexuals in their marriage life, because of their partner's compulsion, or to pretend themselves as straight, have indulged in sex like this" (Baby, 2023, 01:08:10). This statement underscores the role of the community and family in coercing queer individuals into silence and conformity, often at great emotional and psychological cost. The lawyer also remarks on monogamous homosexual relationships, "There are people who maintain monogamous homosexual relationships for a long time," highlighting how such relationships, though genuine, remain invisible and stigmatized in conservative societies. Through these scenes and dialogues, *Kaathal: The core* critiques the role of the church and community in perpetuating stigma, shame, and exclusion. These institutions, rather than offering acceptance or understanding, become enforcers of societal conformity, policing morality and punishing those who deviate from their norms. The film powerfully exposes the cost of this ostracization, showing how it fractures relationships, isolates individuals, and forces them to live inauthentic lives. At the same time, it challenges these structures by portraying the quiet resilience and humanity of its queer characters, urging viewers to question the oppressive systems that dictate personal and collective lives.

6.5 The weight of unspoken truths: love, loss, and the emotional toll of silence in *Kaathal: The core*

In *Kaathal: The core*, the characters of Mathew and Thankan embody the deep emotional toll of silence, exploring how unspoken truths fracture relationships, suppress identities, and leave lives haunted by regret. The monologues of both characters—Mathew addressing his father and Thankan reflecting on love—converge thematically to illustrate the weight of fear, societal expectations, and unfulfilled love in queer lives. Mathew's confrontation with his father is a moment of raw emotional reckoning. In his monologue,

Mathew. You raised me, giving me all freedom. You understood all my needs. But when it came to this, you could not understand me.

He lays bare the pain of being misunderstood by the person he trusted most. This scene captures the intergenerational gap in understanding and acceptance of queer identities. His father's advice in the past that everything will be alright if Mathew got married, reflects the societal norm of using marriage as a cure-all for queerness, a means to enforce conformity rather than address the truth of Mathew's identity. The tragic irony in Mathew's question, "Is everything alright now?" underscores the irreversible damage caused by such well-intentioned but misguided actions. His words reflect not only his personal suffering but also the collateral damage inflicted on Omana, whose life was equally disrupted by this concealment. This scene illuminates the devastating cost of silence and the societal obsession with appearances. Mathew's life, lived as a "drama" to appease societal and familial expectations, becomes a metaphor for the struggle faced by countless queer individuals forced to prioritize external validation over internal truth. The toll of this suppression manifests in guilt and regret, as Mathew blames himself for ruining not just his life but also Omana's, a woman who became an unwitting participant in his concealment. This moment is a poignant reminder of how silence, while protecting individuals from societal backlash, creates emotional wounds that ripple outward, affecting everyone involved. Similarly, Thankan's reflection,

Thankan. "Everyone fears losing the ones they love. But there are people who miss out on love because of that fear." captures the heartbreak of love lost to silence and fear. His words resonate with the quiet despair of living in a world where expressing his true feelings would invite ridicule, rejection, and ostracism. The pain of unspoken love, compounded by the societal stigma of being an older gay man, reflects the unique vulnerability faced by queer individuals in conservative societies. Thankan's grief is not just about losing a chance at love with Mathew but also about the broader impossibility of living authentically in a society that denies him his dignity. Both Mathew and Thankan's narratives converge on the theme of silence as a double-edged sword. On one hand, silence protects them from immediate judgment and harm; on the other, it isolates them emotionally and traps them in lives of unfulfilled potential. Mathew's inability to speak his truth and Thankan's fear of openly loving both stem from the same societal pressures that weaponize shame and conformity against queer individuals. Ultimately, *Kaathal: The core* presents a haunting commentary on the cost of silence in queer lives. Mathew's and Thankan's stories are a testament to the emotional burden of living inauthentically, driven by fear and societal expectations. The film challenges viewers to confront the structures that perpetuate this silence and to imagine a world where love and truth are not

constrained by fear. By giving voice to these unspoken truths, *Kaathal: The core* stands as a powerful call for empathy, understanding, and the dismantling of oppressive norms that continue to marginalize queer lives.

7 Discussion

7.1 Gerontology and queer ageing

Gerontology, the study of ageing, has traditionally focused on the physiological and social implications of growing older. However, for queer individuals, especially older gay men, ageing introduces unique challenges. Calasanti and Slevin (2006) emphasize that traditional gerontological studies often neglect the relational needs and sexual desires of older adults, especially in the context of non-heteronormative sexual identities. For older gay men, this age-based invisibility is compounded by cultural conservatism. Butler (1980) explores the concept of "double alienation," where older gay individuals face both ageism and homophobia, making them particularly vulnerable in family-centric societies like India. In this context, the invisibility of older gay men in Indian cinema reflects broader societal tendencies to marginalize non-heteronormative sexual identities, exacerbating their social and emotional isolation. Gerontological frameworks offer critical insights into the intersection of ageing and queer identities. Ageism, as defined by Butler (1989), reinforces the invisibility of older individuals, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, where cultural narratives often prioritize youth and vitality. Older queer individuals experience "double alienation," grappling with the compounded effects of ageism and homophobia (Butler, 1980). Studies highlight that older LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently desexualized and marginalized, their identities reduced to stereotypes that deny their emotional and sexual agency (Calasanti and Slevin, 2006; Suh and Son, 2020). In *Kaathal: The core*, the lives of Mathew and Thankan reveal how conservative cultural values in Kerala exacerbate this marginalization, limiting their opportunities for self-expression and social belonging.

7.2 Queer ageing and cinematic representations

Ferrer C. (2017) and Ferrer J. (2017) critiques the absence of older LGBTQ+ figures in mainstream media, asserting that queer narratives often prioritize youth, marginalizing the natural progression of queer identity into older adulthood. This is especially evident in Indian cinema, where queer characters are frequently associated with youth, rebellion, and a lack of familial ties. However, *Kaathal: The core* provides a rare representation of older gay men, showing them navigating familial expectations, societal pressure, and emotional isolation while also asserting their sexuality. This aligns with the work of Hicks and Lee (2006), who discuss the "closeted" nature of many

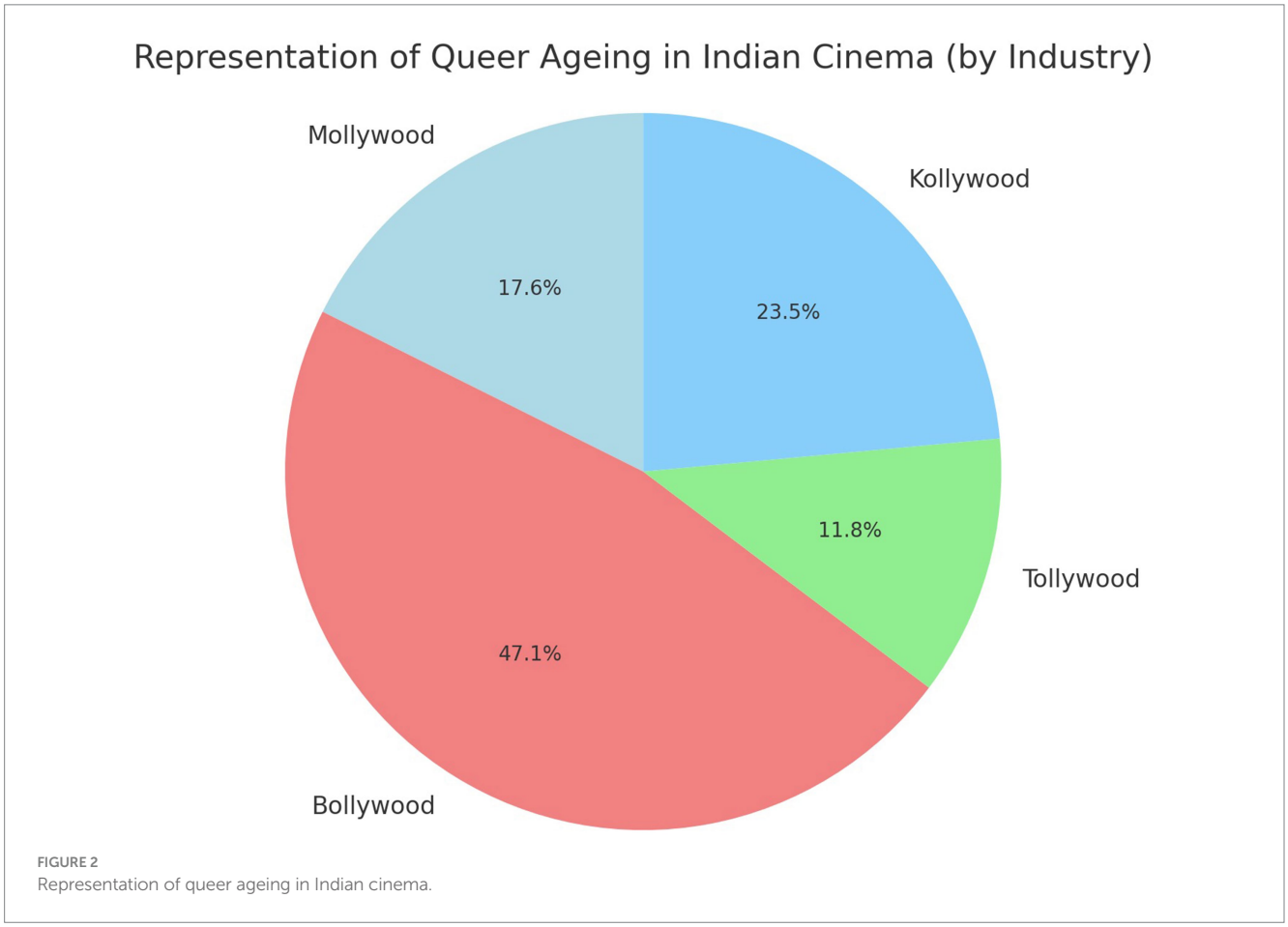

FIGURE 2
Representation of queer ageing in Indian cinema.

older LGBTQ+ individuals, who are forced to live discreet lives due to societal rejection. The data in the Figure 2 chart highlights Bollywood's dominance and the limited visibility of older queer identities in regional cinema., Malayalam cinema has also historically been hesitant to depict LGBTQ+ narratives, particularly those involving older individuals, and as evident in the chart contributes 17.6% representation underscoring the limited visibility of older queer identities, thus making *Kaathal: The core* a significant intervention. Cinematic portrayals have the power to influence societal attitudes by challenging entrenched stereotypes. By depicting older queer individuals as complex, multi-dimensional people rather than tragic figures or objects of pity, films can foster empathy, dismantle stigma, and normalize diverse identities. Positive portrayals, meanwhile, can inspire intergenerational dialogue, encouraging younger audiences to recognize the social struggles faced by older queer individuals and promoting acceptance across generations. The film explores the compounded marginalization faced by older queer individuals, who experience both ageism and homophobia within a patriarchal and family-centered society in Kerala's conservative social framework.

The film chosen is uniquely suitable for examining queer ageing in the Malayalam context because it:

- Engages directly with Kerala's cultural conservatism.
- Depicts older queer characters navigating emotional suppression and societal rejection.
- Uses iconoclastic storytelling to challenge heteronormative family ideals.
- Introduces a nuanced portrayal of queer ageing, an area largely overlooked in Indian cinema.

The film offers a distinctive portrayal of queer ageing that diverges from the youth-centric narratives commonly seen in Indian cinema, such as *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) (Batra, 2016) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) (Bose, 2014). While these films focus on younger characters exploring identity, *Kaathal: The core* addresses the emotional repression, familial obligations, and social stigma faced by older queer individuals. Comparatively, the film aligns with international works like *Love is Strange* (2014) (Sachs, 2014) and *Supernova* (2020) (MacQueen, 2020), which explore queer ageing, yet it uniquely embeds these themes within Kerala's conservative sociocultural framework. Additionally, *Kaathal: The core* extends the discourse seen in *Aligarh* (2015) (Mehta, 2015) by emphasizing the long-term emotional toll of a closeted life.

7.3 Intersectionality in queer ageing

Queer ageing remains a marginalized area within the broader spectrum of LGBTQ+ studies, a reflection of the societal inclination to frame queer experiences primarily through the lens of youth and self-discovery. This tendency to focus on the younger demographic sidelines the nuanced realities of older queer individuals, whose experiences intersect with age, societal expectations, and personal struggles. The narratives of older gay men, in particular, are often marked by invisibility or relegation to supporting roles in dominant discourses, further perpetuating their erasure. While progress has been made in representing diverse queer identities in global media, Indian cinema has been slow to embrace these changes, particularly when it comes to exploring queerness in its multifaceted forms. Stories that center around queer ageing are rare, and those that do exist often rely on reductive stereotypes or cast older queer characters as symbols of tragedy or deviance. The absence of nuanced narratives leaves a critical gap in understanding how ageing impacts queer identities, particularly in patriarchal societies where heteronormative family structures dominate.

The concept of intersectionality is crucial in understanding the complex realities of queer ageing. Older queer individuals face layered forms of marginalization that intersect across age, sexuality, and cultural norms. In *Kaathal: The core*, this intersectionality is evident as the protagonist navigates the dual burden of being an ageing individual in a conservative society while grappling with his concealed queer identity.

7.4 Iconoclasm and breaking of norms

Iconoclasm refers to the act of challenging and rejecting established norms, beliefs, or institutions. In the context of *Kaathal: The core*, the film's depiction of older gay men challenges traditional views of ageing, queerness, and family. As observed by Anupam and Tannishtha (2020), the marginalization of older LGBTQ+ individuals disrupts societal assumptions of sexual functionality and moral duty. The protagonists of the film, by asserting their identities despite familial pressures, represent a form of iconoclasm that critiques societal expectations about ageing and sexuality. Their stories reflect the quiet, often unseen resilience of older gay men, who continue to navigate societal and familial structures while carving out spaces for themselves within conservative environments. This iconoclastic portrayal of queer ageing resonates with the broader need for more inclusive representations of LGBTQ+ lives at all stages of life (Dyer, 1993).

7.5 Intersecting marginalizations: age and queer identity

7.5.1 Queerness, ageing, and societal erasure

Kaathal: The core emerges as a groundbreaking cinematic exploration of the intersectionality between queerness and ageing, offering a poignant critique of the emotional toll imposed by conservative socio-cultural frameworks. By employing a narrative, intersectional, and gerontological lens, this research illuminates how the film critiques patriarchal and heteronormative systems while shedding light on the compounded struggles faced by older gay men navigating dual marginalization. At its core, the film delves into the nuanced realities of queer ageing. Gerontology provides a critical framework to understand how ageing amplifies the marginalization of LGBTQ+ individuals. As society emphasizes youth in both heteronormative and queer spaces, older individuals like Mathew are rendered invisible, their lived experiences erased from dominant narratives. *Kaathal: The core* confronts this erasure, challenging the societal obsession with youthful vitality and heteronormative ideals that disregard the dignity and authenticity of queer lives in later years.

7.5.2 The burdens of conformity and a call for cultural transformation

Mathew's story encapsulates the intersectional struggle of age and homosexuality, where his identity as an older gay man is stifled by

societal expectations. The film portrays how patriarchal norms, compounded by ageist and heteronormative biases, demand conformity to roles of husband, father, and community figurehead. Mathew's silence becomes both a shield and a prison, enabling him to navigate societal expectations while suppressing his authentic self. His inability to break free from these roles results in profound guilt, regret, and emotional isolation—burdens that deepen with age. The intersection of queerness and ageing exposes the inadequacies of cultural frameworks that fail to account for diverse identities and lived experiences, especially in older age. Gerontology, as applied in the film, reveals how ageing intersects with queerness to exacerbate social invisibility and emotional isolation. For Mathew, the cultural and familial constructs that dictate his role as a patriarch leave no space for his authentic self, forcing him to perform heteronormativity at great personal cost. This performance not only fractures his relationship with himself but also inflicts collateral damage on Omana, his wife, who is similarly trapped within patriarchal expectations. The iconoclastic nature of *Kaathal: The core* emerges through its bold challenge to patriarchal and heteronormative structures. By portraying older queer characters like Mathew and Thankan, the film disrupts dominant cultural narratives that prioritize youth and heterosexuality. It questions the legitimacy of societal frameworks that enforce rigid roles and appearances, advocating instead for a reimagining of familial, religious, and cultural systems. These systems, as critiqued in the film, perpetuate the marginalization of individuals who defy normative expectations, particularly those at the intersection of queerness and ageing. In addition to its critique of societal norms, the film also highlights the resilience of older LGBTQ+ individuals. It situates their struggles within a broader gerontological discourse, underscoring the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by this demographic. *Kaathal: The core* transcends its narrative to become a powerful iconoclastic critique of societal structures that silence and marginalize queer lives, particularly those of older individuals. Its nuanced portrayal of queer struggles, combined with its bold critique of patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks, calls for a cultural shift toward inclusivity, empathy, and visibility. Through its layered storytelling and iconoclastic stance, *Kaathal: The core* invites society to dismantle its biases and embrace the authenticity, dignity, and humanity of all individuals, regardless of age, gender, or sexuality.

7.6 Interrelation of themes

7.6.1 Queerness and ageing in Indian cinema

In Indian cinema, where family values are often glorified and heterosexual relationships are positioned as the societal norm, older queer characters face dual marginalization: as members of a queer community coping with the stigma and ageing individuals in a youth-oriented culture too. The Malayalam film *"Kaathal: The core,"* directed by Jeo Baby, is a bolder intervention in this context, presenting a layered narrative that interrogates the intersections of queerness and ageing. Through its central character, Mathew Devasy, the film explores the complexities of living as an older gay man in a conservative society. Mathew's character challenges the traditional depictions of ageing men as either devoid of sexuality or confined to heteronormative roles, offering instead a poignant look at the hidden struggles of older queer individuals. The film captures the emotional toll of societal expectations and familial obligations on Mathew, who copes with his identity in an environment that offers little room for authenticity. Using the lens of gerontology, *"Kaathal: The core"* invites a deeper examination of how ageing intersects with queerness, particularly in spaces where heteronormative ideals dictate personal and social relationships. Gerontology, the study of ageing, offers a critical framework to understand how older queer individuals contend with societal pressures while negotiating their emotional, sexual and social lives.

7.6.2 Narrative complexity and social critique

In the film, Mathew's character arc is shaped by the tension between his public persona—a respected political candidate—and his private identity as a queer man. The internalized shame that Mathew carries is emblematic of the broader struggles faced by older gay men, who are often forced into silence due to societal norms. This silence is particularly pronounced in traditional family structures, where the concept of queerness is either ignored or vilified. The film addresses these tensions through nuanced dialogues and moments of introspection, highlighting the isolation and erasure that come with ageing as a queer individual. One of the most compelling aspects of *"Kaathal: The core"* is its critique of how older queer individuals are desexualized in popular media and public discourse. Sexuality, when portrayed in the context of older individuals, is often dismissed or treated as taboo, especially in conservative societies like India. For older gay men, this erasure is compounded by societal homophobia, which views queerness as an aberration that must be suppressed or corrected. Mathew's relationship with Thankan, subtly implied through the film's dialogues and character interactions, challenges this narrative by presenting queerness as a lifelong experience rather than a phase confined to youth. Their bond, while understated, is a powerful testament to the resilience of queer love in the face of societal stigma. However, the film also does not shy away from portraying the emotional toll this relationship takes on both men, particularly as they navigate a world that refuses to acknowledge their existence. The traditional family structure, as portrayed in the film, serves as both a site of comfort and conflict for Mathew. His marriage to Omana reflects the societal pressures that queer individuals face to conform to heteronormative ideals. Omana's eventual confrontation of Mathew reveals the emotional cost of such arrangements, not only for the queer individual but also for their spouse. The dialogues between Mathew and Omana capture the pain of a relationship built on societal expectations rather than mutual understanding, shedding light on the collateral damage of compulsory heterosexuality. These moments of conflict are juxtaposed with Mathew's interactions with his political colleagues, who represent the performative progressiveness of a society that claims to embrace diversity while perpetuating exclusionary practices. The film's depiction of political hypocrisy underscores the challenges of navigating public life as a queer individual, particularly in spaces where personal identity becomes fodder for political agendas. In addition to its narrative depth, *"Kaathal: The core"* is significant for its contribution to the broader discourse on queer visibility in Indian cinema. By centering its story on an older gay man, the film disrupts the dominant narrative framework that prioritizes youth and romance in queer storytelling. It also raises important questions about the lack of institutional and community support for older queer individuals, who are often left to navigate their struggles in isolation. The film's nuanced portrayal of Mathew's character serves as a call to action for more inclusive and representative storytelling that acknowledges the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community.

7.6.3 Intersectionality and broader implications

This study situates *"Kaathal: The core"* within the broader context of queer studies and gerontology, examining how the film addresses the intersections of age, queerness, and societal expectations. It argues for a more comprehensive understanding of queer ageing that goes beyond the limitations of existing representations, advocating for narratives that reflect the complexities of older queer individuals' lives. By highlighting the emotional, sexual, and social dimensions of queer ageing, the film contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to challenge stereotypes and expand the scope of queer representation in Indian cinema. In doing so, *"Kaathal: The core"* not only amplifies the voices of older queer individuals but also invites audiences to rethink their assumptions about identity, love, and ageing. This study employs an intersectional approach to analyse the experiences of older gay men as portrayed in *Kaathal: The core*. The theory of Intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a nuanced lens for examining how the overlapping identities of age, gender, and sexuality shape the visibility and lived experiences of older LGBTQ+ individuals (Crenshaw, 1989). Originally conceptualized to highlight the compounded discrimination faced by Black women, Intersectionality Theory has since become a critical tool for understanding how multiple identities converge, producing unique forms of social disadvantage or privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). In the context of this study, an intersectional approach allows for a deeper exploration of how older gay men experience marginalization within a heteronormative, family-centric society that often enforces rigid gender and sexual norms. Applying intersectionality in this research enables an examination of how these men's identities as both older and gay compound their challenges, particularly within the conservative social milieu of Kerala. As the protagonist confront social expectations tied to age and familial duty, as well as pressures stemming from societal rejection of queer identities, they navigate a complex landscape marked by both resilience and vulnerability. This approach underscores the necessity of analyzing older queer identities not in isolation but as products of intersecting forces such as, age, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural context, each influencing their portrayal and treatment in the film. The intersectional lens not only highlights the compounded stigma faced by older LGBTQ+ individuals but also provides insights into the ways these characters resist or conform to societal expectations, bringing visibility to the often-neglected dimensions of queer ageing in Indian cinema.

8 Implications

This research not only enriches the understanding of queer ageing and iconoclastic narratives in *Kaathal: The core* but also serves as a call to action on academics, filmmakers, and society at large. It advocates for more inclusive cinematic storytelling and cultural spaces that recognize the authenticity, dignity, and live experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals across age, class, and cultural boundaries.

8.1 Contribution to queer studies and intersectionality

By examining *Kaathal: The core*, this research expands the discourse on queer representation in Indian regional cinema, particularly focusing on the neglected theme of queer ageing. It highlights how heteronormative societal structures, and patriarchal expectations intersect with age and sexuality, leading to compounded marginalization. This study offers a deeper understanding of how intersectional identities—being queer, older, and part of a conservative society—are portrayed, providing a foundation for further exploration of underrepresented LGBTQ+ narratives.

8.2 Reshaping film criticism in regional cinemas

The research contributes to film criticism by emphasizing the role of regional cinema, particularly Malayalam cinema, in pushing the boundaries of queer storytelling. While much of mainstream Indian cinema remains hesitant to engage deeply with LGBTQ+ themes, *Kaathal: The core* serves as a landmark in depicting complex queer experiences. The study invites filmmakers and critics to recognize the importance of diverse, authentic narratives and to challenge stereotypes that persist in cinematic portrayals.

8.3 Impact on cultural conversations around queer ageing

The focus on queer ageing in *Kaathal: The core* calls attention to a topic that has remained largely invisible in cultural discourse. By portraying older gay men like Mathew and Thankan, the film confronts the emotional, social, and psychological realities of ageing queer individuals. This research encourages greater societal awareness of the challenges faced by older LGBTQ+ individuals and advocates for spaces of inclusion, empathy, and dignity for people at the intersections of age and sexual identity.

8.4 Challenging societal norms through iconoclasm

The film's iconoclastic critique of heteronormative marriage, familial duty, and societal expectations opens critical reflections at the cost of silence and inauthenticity. This research emphasizes how cultural productions like *Kaathal: The core*, can function as a tool for resistance, challenging oppressive systems and advocating for more inclusive definitions of family, identity, and love. It provides a blueprint for rethinking societal norms that continue to marginalize queer individuals.

8.5 Academic and policy interventions

The findings from this research can inform academic studies on gender, sexuality, and cinema, providing a critical framework for analyzing LGBTQ+ narratives in regional film industries. Furthermore, it holders' implications for policymakers and cultural advocates, urging them to foster environments that promote inclusive media representation and challenge systemic silences around queer identities.

9 Limitations

While this research provides a critical analysis of *Kaathal: The core* with a focus on queer ageing and iconoclastic narratives, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study is limited to a single film, while being significant, cannot fully encompass the breadth of queer representation and ageing experiences in Malayalam cinema or in Indian regional cinema at large. This singular focus restricts the generalizability of the findings, as other films may approach similar themes differently through narrative style, cultural contexts, or directorial intent. Secondly, the analysis relies heavily on narrative and visual elements, limiting the incorporation of external factors such as audience reception or societal impact, which are crucial in understanding how such portrayals influence cultural perceptions. The absence of empirical data—such as interviews with audiences, filmmakers, or members of the queer community—further narrows the study's scope. A more holistic understanding of the film's impact would require integrating primary data with textual analysis. Additionally, the research addresses the themes of queer ageing and societal silence, while it does not deeply examine how other intersecting factors—such as class, religion, and caste—affect the live experiences of the older queer individuals in Kerala. These intersections may play a pivotal role in shaping the characters' struggle, which remains an area for further exploration.

As with any qualitative analysis, interpretations are influenced by the researcher's cultural background, personal beliefs, and academic framework. While efforts were made to approach *Kaathal: The core* through established queer and gerontological theories, subjective interpretations may have shaped the analysis of character motivations, narrative themes, and cinematic techniques. The researcher's cultural background, language familiarity, and personal experiences may have influenced the interpretation of themes in the film. To minimize bias, multiple viewings, secondary sources, and theoretical frameworks were employed for balance. Despite these efforts, some emotional or symbolic elements may invite alternative readings, underscoring the need for diverse scholarly perspectives on queer ageing in Indian cinema.

10 Future scope

This study opens avenues for further research on queer representation and ageing, in Indian regional cinemas. Future studies can expand the scope by analyzing a broader selection of films across different linguistic and cultural contexts within India, comparing how themes of queer ageing, societal pressure, and iconoclasm are depicted. A comparative analysis between Malayalam cinema and other Indian film industries, such as Bollywood, Kollywood, and Tollywood, can offer a deeper understanding of how regional cultural frameworks shape narratives in the case of queerness and ageing. Further research can also focus on audience reception to the films like *Kaathal: The core*. Examining how viewers interpret, accept, or challenge the film's themes can provide insights into the cultural and social impact of such representations, bridging the gap between cinematic portrayals and real-life experiences. Empirical and Ethnographic studies involving interviews with older queer individuals, filmmakers, and LGBTQ+ activists can enrich the discourse, grounding the analysis in live experiences. Moreover, exploring how queer ageing intersects with other social identities—such as caste, class, and religion—can offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by older LGBTQ+ individuals in diverse socio-cultural contexts. This intersectional approach can shed light on the systemic barriers that remain invisible in single-axis analyses. To improve the representation of queer ageing, filmmakers should expand narratives beyond repression and tragedy, showcasing themes of resilience, empowerment, and fulfilling relationships. Further, cultural policymakers can support such portrayals by offering funding incentives, promoting inclusive narratives in public broadcasting, and encouraging representation in mainstream media. Authentic casting of older LGBTQ+ actors and consulting advocacy groups also can ensure accuracy and sensitivity. Future research can expand by incorporating audience reception studies to assess viewer interpretations, ethnographic research to gather firsthand experiences of older LGBTQ+ individuals, and longitudinal studies to track evolving queer representations in Indian cinema. Discourse analysis of media responses and comparative studies with international films can reveal cultural contrasts, while intersectional approaches can explore the role of caste, class, and religion in shaping queer ageing narratives. These methods would offer deeper insights into the complexities of queer identity and ageing in diverse contexts.

In concluding further scope, this research lays the foundation for understanding queer ageing and iconoclastic narratives in *Kaathal: The core*. Its limits open pathways for future research. A broader, intersectional, and empirical approach will further deepen our understanding of the complexities of queer lives and the role of cinema, in representing them authentically.

11 Conclusion

On 2 February 2016, the Supreme Court decided to review the criminalization of homosexual activity. On 6 September 2018, the Supreme Court unanimously struck down Section 377 as unconstitutional, ruling that it infringed on the fundamental rights of autonomy, intimacy, and identity, thus legalizing homosexuality in India, including in Kerala. This research underscores how "*Kaathal: The core*" serves as a powerful iconoclastic narrative that challenges the deeply entrenched societal, cultural, and institutional perceptions of identity, family, and ageing, within a heteronormative framework. By focusing mainly on queer ageing, the film disrupts conventional portrayals of LGBTQ+ lives in the Malayalam cinema, offering a rare and sensitive depiction of older gay men grappling with their identities amidst societal silence and repression. Characters, Mathew Devasy and Thankan represent individuals caught between personal authenticity and societal expectations, highlighting the cost of living truthfully in a culture that privileges conformity. The film embodies the burden of queer ageing, wherein the weight of unspoken truths forces individuals into the lives of emotional compromise. The film critiques not only heteronormativity but also patriarchal structures that entrap both LGBTQ+ individuals and their spouses. Together, the narratives challenge the institution of marriage as a tool for enforcing conformity while advocating for individual freedom and emotional authenticity.

By addressing queer ageing, a theme, largely neglected by Indian cinema, "*Kaathal: The core*" stands as a bolder iconoclastic text that dismantles societal assumptions about gender, sexuality, and age. It

establishes a place within the larger trajectory of queer representation in Malayalam cinema, while marking a significant progression toward inclusive storytelling. This research highlights the importance of such narratives in fostering empathy and visibility, urging society to move beyond silence and shame, toward acceptance and celebration of diverse identities. In doing so, the film paves the way for a more equitable cultural landscape where the dignity of living authentically is not a privilege but a fundamental right. Queer aging, often invisible and marginalized in Indian society, is brought to the forefront in *Kaathal: The core*, challenging the status quo with its unapologetic portrayal of lived experiences. The film not only defies traditional notions of aging but also highlights the resilience and strength of older LGBTQ+ individuals. It serves as a mirror to the silenced voices of queer elders, who have long been sidelined in both cinematic and societal narratives. By showcasing their lives with dignity and grace, *Kaathal: The core* administers viewers to confront ageism alongside heteronormativity, reinforcing the idea that love, desire, and self-expression know no boundaries of time.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

AP: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation. GC: Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Chat GPT 4.0 was used for enhancement of language, restoring the original idea, concept and theorization.

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Immigration, language education, & trauma: exploring the intersectionality of gay Dominican immigrant experiences

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This article explores the intersectionality of immigration, language education, and trauma among gay Dominican immigrant men living in New York City. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the research examines the lived experiences of four individuals, highlighting the compounded adversities they face due to their intersecting identities as LGBTQ+, men of color, and immigrants. The case studies reveal significant trauma and mental health struggles stemming from pre-migration violence, in-transit dangers, and post-migration discrimination. Additionally, the study addresses the critical role of language proficiency in their integration and the importance of tailored support systems, including community networks and legal protections. The findings underscore the severe impact of discrimination based on sexual orientation, race, and immigration status on the mental health and social integration of gay Dominican immigrant men. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrate remarkable resilience and hope for the future, striving for better employment opportunities, educational advancement, and community belonging. This article provides insights into the specific needs of LGBTQ+ immigrants and offers recommendations for improving support systems, policies, and educational practices to better serve this vulnerable population.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality, LGBTQ+ immigrants, Dominican immigrants, trauma, language education, resilience, New York City

Introduction

The intersectionality of immigration, language education, and trauma presents a complex and multifaceted challenge, particularly for queer immigrants from marginalized communities. This article focuses on the unique experiences of gay Dominican immigrant men living in New York City, exploring how their intersecting identities impact their lives. Queer immigrants face compounded adversities, including discrimination based on their sexual orientation, race, language proficiency, and immigration status, which significantly affect their mental health and ability to integrate into their new environment (Attia et al., 2023; Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019). For gay Dominican immigrants in New York City, the challenges are particularly acute. They must navigate the complexities of being a racial minority, an immigrant, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community simultaneously.

This article employs a qualitative study approach, specifically utilizing case studies, to explore the themes that emerge from the lived experiences of gay Dominican immigrants. A case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of individual lived experiences, revealing details, and providing a nuanced understanding of how intersecting identities shape the lives of LGBTQ+ immigrant groups (Comas-Díaz, 2021). Through detailed case studies of four individuals, this article highlights their struggles, resilience, and hopes for the future. By examining their experiences through the lens of intersectionality, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the specific needs of LGBTQ+ immigrants and offer recommendations for better support systems, policies, and educational practices. The article also seeks to highlight the importance of language education in empowering immigrants and facilitating their integration into their new environment.

Although the broader literature discusses LGBTQ+ immigrant populations, the participants in this study all identified as gay men. Therefore, the findings specifically reflect the intersectional experiences of gay Dominican immigrant men in New York City. This reflects the limitations of a case study approach, often being suggested that it is too particular; however, case studies are valuable since a scientific discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed cases studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Background and context

The intersectional framework is critical in understanding the compounded experiences of marginalized individuals. Intersectionality, originally conceptualized to address the overlapping oppressions faced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989), has been applied to various contexts (Romero, 2023), including LGBTQ+ immigrants (Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019; Comas-Díaz, 2021) and immigrant and refugee trauma (Critelli and Yalim, 2023), to highlight how multiple social identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect to shape unique experiences of privilege and oppression. LGBTQ+ immigrants, particularly those from Latinx backgrounds, face significant barriers that are often overlooked. Studies have shown that LGBTQ+ youth, immigrants, and refugees each face substantial challenges, which are exacerbated when these identities overlap (Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019; Skinta and Nakamura, 2021). These individuals often encounter higher rates of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, due to the compounded trauma experienced throughout their migration journey and settlement in a new country (Awad et al., 2021).

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations experience higher rates of mental health disorders than their heterosexual counterparts—not due to their sexual orientation itself, but as a result of minority stress stemming from prejudice, discrimination, and social stigma (Meyer, 1995, 2003). Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model accounts for this elevated risk by identifying three key components: *distal stressors*, which are external and objective events such as discrimination and violence; *proximal stressors*, which involve internal psychological processes like expectations of rejection, concealment of sexual identity, and internalized homophobia; and *coping and resilience*, which refer to the development of adaptive strategies such as community support and identity pride that help buffer the negative effects of minority stress. Minority stress from LGBTQ+ identities are further compounded by traumatogenic stages within immigration.

Immigration and trauma

One of the most pressing issues for LGBTQ+ immigrants is the pervasive trauma they face. This trauma can occur at various stages: pre-migration, during the journey, and post-migration (Midgette and González, 2023; Foster, 2001). Many flee their home countries to escape homophobic violence and persecution, only to encounter additional stressors such as acculturative stress, fear of deportation, and difficulties in accessing education and stable employment upon arrival in the United States??. Trauma may occur in each migration stage or across stages. These challenges are further compounded by the barriers related to language proficiency and the need for effective language education.

Recent research extends Meyer's Minority Stress Model to highlight the unique, compounded stressors that LGBTQ+ immigrants and refugees face when multiple marginalized identities intersect. For example, Alessi et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study of LGBTQ+ refugees from Muslim-majority countries who resettled in Austria and the Netherlands, revealing that participants encountered multiple, layered forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religion, and immigration status. The study found that Islamophobic attitudes in host countries and prejudice from their own diaspora communities left many LGBTQ+ refugees socially isolated and dependent on host community members who themselves sometimes perpetuated discrimination. These findings underscore how distal stressors—such as overt xenophobia and subtle exclusion—and proximal stressors—like internalized stigma and fear of rejection—compound to heighten psychological distress, consistent with Meyer's (1995, 2003) model. This work illustrates the importance of situating queer immigrant and refugee experiences within an intersectional minority stress framework to better understand the integration barriers they face and to inform more inclusive support systems (Alessi et al., 2020).

Cumulative racial/ethnic trauma

The concept of cumulative racial/ethnic trauma provides a framework for understanding the layered and ongoing trauma faced by immigrants due to historical, national, and institutional discrimination. This framework is particularly relevant for racial minority immigrants, such as those from the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) regions, who experience trauma before, during, and after migration (Awad et al., 2021). The trauma often begins with the conditions in their home countries, including violence, political strife, and oppression, and continues with the acculturative stress and discrimination they face in their host countries (Awad et al., 2021).

In the United States, Ramirez and Paz Galupo (2019) build on Meyer's Minority Stress Model by examining how multiple minority stress processes affect the mental health of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color (LGB-POC). Their study found that both distal stressors—like microaggressions and daily heterosexist experiences—and proximal stressors—such as internalized stigma, sexual orientation rumination, and identity salience—significantly predicted depression and anxiety symptoms. Notably, their regression analyses showed that proximal stressors accounted for an additional 15% of the variance in mental health outcomes beyond what distal stressors explained alone, highlighting the substantial psychological toll of internalized oppression. Furthermore, bisexual participants reported even higher levels of distress compared to monosexual participants, suggesting that intersecting sexual, racial, and, potentially, immigration-related minority stressors can combine in unique and harmful ways (Ramirez and Paz Galupo, 2019; White et al., 2024). This study reinforces the need to apply an intersectional perspective when examining the mental health and resilience of Latinx and other LGBTQ+ people of color, aligning with the themes emerging from this case study of gay Dominican immigrant men.

The role of language education

Language proficiency is a critical factor in the integration process for immigrants (Schuss, 2018). For LGBTQ+ immigrants, mastering the English language is not only essential for better employment opportunities but also for advocating for their rights and accessing necessary services. However, learning a new language while dealing with the trauma of migration and discrimination can be an overwhelming task (Skinta and Nakamura, 2021). Effective language education, tailored to the unique needs of LGBTQ+ immigrants, is crucial in helping them navigate their new environment and build a stable, fulfilling life (Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019).

Theoretical frameworks

To complement the understanding of intersectionality specifically to Latinx LGBTQ+ immigrant populations, this article utilizes several theoretical frameworks to understand the experiences of gay Dominican immigrant men living in New York City. The cumulative disadvantage theory explains how prolonged exposure to various forms of disadvantage and discrimination leads to significant negative outcomes over time (Burgess, 2021). The minority stress model further explains the mental health challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals due to the chronic stress from their marginalized status (Skinta and Nakamura, 2021; Meyer, 2003, 1995). Finally, queer migration theory helps to contextualize the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants, highlighting how their sexual orientation and gender identity intersect with their migration status to create unique challenges and experiences (Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019). These frameworks collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by gay Dominican immigrant men in New York City. By examining their experiences through these lenses, this article aims to shed light on the specific needs of LGBTQ+ immigrants and offer insights into how support systems, policies, and educational practices can be improved to better serve this vulnerable population.

TABLE 1 Participant demographics.

Participant	Age	Immigration status	Education	Occupation
Carlos Peralta	27	Seeking Asylum	Secondary School	Independent Barber
Juan Martinez	29	Student Visa	College	Works in a cellular phone store
Miguel Rodriguez	24	Undocumented	Elementary School	Works in a grocery store
Luis Torres	32	Resident	College	Hospital Translator

Methodology

Research design

This study employs a qualitative approach using case studies to explore the intersectionality of immigration, language education, and trauma among LGBTQ+ Dominican immigrants in New York City. The case study approach is particularly suited for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within real-life contexts (González, 2021; Yin, 2014). By focusing on individual experiences, this approach allows for a detailed understanding of how intersecting identities impact the lives of queer immigrants.

Participants

The study focuses on four LGBTQ+ Dominican immigrants in New York City, aged between 24 and 32. The four participants identified themselves as men and either "gay" or "homosexual." They have varying documentation statuses, including undocumented, asylum seeking, student visa, and visa sponsored. The selection of participants aimed to capture a range of experiences related to immigration status, educational background, and employment. Table 1 below displays the participant demographic data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Data were securely stored, and participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any repercussions.

Data collection and participant recruitment

Data collection involved the use of semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored participants' backgrounds, immigration experiences, experiences with trauma, education experiences, work

experiences, English language learning, and their hopes and aspirations for the future. Participants were given the option to respond in the language they preferred (Spanish or English). The interviews took place in-person, recorded, and transcribed.

Participants for this study were recruited through convenience sampling by accessing informal networks of gay Dominican immigrants living in New York City. Initial contacts were made through local LGBTQ+ community organizations and social groups, with participants referring one another to the researcher through word-of-mouth and trusted connections. This snowball-like referral process ensured access to individuals who were willing to share their personal migration and identity narratives. Participants were selected based on the relevance and depth of the stories they shared during preliminary conversations, and only the data from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted after selection were included in the final analysis. This research project received ethics approval from the author's university Institutional Review Board (IRB) on 5 August 2024, ensuring that all procedures complied with ethical guidelines for confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation.

Analysis

Data analysis involved two cycles of coding. The first cycle focused on labeling data chunks to identify patterns and themes within each case. The second cycle involved cross-case comparisons to uncover common themes and variations across cases (Yin, 2014). Initial coding identified key themes related to trauma, language learning, and integration. Axial coding was used to explore relationships between themes and develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2016). Common themes included trauma and mental health struggles, intersectionality of identities, employment and economic hardship, language barriers and educational pursuits, support systems and community, and resilience and hope for the future. These themes are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Case studies of gay dominican immigrant men in New York City

To gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and resilience of gay Dominican immigrant men in New York City, this section presents detailed case studies of four individuals: Carlos Peralta, Juan Martinez, Miguel Rodriguez, and Luis Torres. These case studies illuminate how intersecting identities—such as being part of the LGBTQ+ community, men of color, and immigrants—shape their experiences. Each narrative highlights the personal struggles, employment circumstances, educational backgrounds, language proficiency, and coping mechanisms of these individuals.

The case studies explore their varied documentation statuses, ranging from undocumented to asylum seeking, and their diverse educational achievements, from high school dropout to college graduate. Through their stories, we examine the compounded adversities they face, including discrimination, economic hardship, and mental health challenges, as well as their remarkable resilience and hope for the future. These narratives provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants and underscore the importance of tailored support systems and policies to aid their integration and wellbeing. By focusing on individual stories, this section aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how intersecting identities impact the lives of gay Dominican immigrant men in New York City, shedding light on common themes and patterns across cases.

Carlos Peralta

Carlos Peralta, a 27-year-old gay man from Santo Domingo, fled the Dominican Republic less than a year ago to escape homophobic violence. Growing up, Carlos faced severe bullying and physical abuse in school due to his sexual orientation. His family's initial support waned when they became targets of community ostracism. Seeking safety, Carlos embarked on a perilous journey to the United States by flying into Guatemala, traveling into Mexico, and then crossing the U.S. Mexican Border. During the crossing, he turned himself in to border patrol indicating he is seeking asylum to escape violence in the Dominican Republic due to his sexuality.

Carlos's asylum application is pending, leaving him in a state of uncertainty. Despite his high school education, his lack of documentation limits his job prospects. He works long hours as a barber, a job that barely covers his living expenses. Carlos struggles with the trauma of his past and the fear of deportation. Determined to improve his English, Carlos enrolled in evening classes at a local community center. Learning English has been a challenge due to his demanding job and constant anxiety. However, he remains committed, knowing that better language skills could open doors to more opportunities.

Carlos finds solace in the small but supportive LGBTQ+ community in his neighborhood. They provide a sense of belonging and help him cope with his ongoing struggles. His dream is to complete his asylum process successfully and eventually pursue further education in the U.S.

Juan Martinez

Juan Martinez, 29, from Santiago, arrived in New York City on a student visa to enroll in English language training program. Juan, who is openly gay, faced societal discrimination and familial rejection in the Dominican Republic. His decision to study in the U.S. was also an escape from his family as well as seeking economic opportunities.

Juan's advanced English proficiency helped him secure a job in a cellular phone store front; however, his pay in unreported due to not having permission to work since he is on a student visa. Interestingly Juan admits that he doesn't attend the English language training program but maintains matriculation to sustain his student visa. However, his visa is set to expire, and he plans to remain in the country undocumented unless he can find someone to marry him, either for love or by paying someone ten-thousand dollars.

The pressures of maintaining his visa status adds to his anxiety of working long hours and paying rent. His outlet from these daily pressures is a social group of gay Dominican men that keep communication using the telecommunication application "WhatsApp" and going to local bars, both gay and heteronormative, together. He hopes he can remain in the U.S. and gain permission to work so that he can secure a job that will provide him with economic and social mobility.

Miguel Rodriguez

Miguel Rodriguez, 24, left the Dominican Republic 6 years ago, escaping an environment of severe homophobia and economic hardship. With limited education and no high school diploma, Miguel's options were limited. His undocumented status further complicates his situation, as he lives in constant fear of being deported.

Miguel's basic English proficiency restricts his job opportunities. He works at a convenience store, where he faces long hours and low pay. The language barrier makes it difficult for him to advocate for himself or seek better employment. He often feels isolated and struggles to communicate effectively with customers and coworkers. The trauma of his journey to the U.S. remains fresh in Miguel's mind. He endured dangerous conditions and exploitation during his migration, experiences that have left deep psychological and physical scars. While crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, his right arm and leg got caught on barbed wires when running across a river hearing gun shots in the air. In New York, he continues to face discrimination, both for his undocumented status and his sexual orientation.

Miguel attends free English classes whenever possible, but his progress is slow due to his demanding work schedule. Despite these challenges, he dreams of 1 day obtaining legal status, improving his English, and pursuing further education. The support from a local LGBTQ+ organization provides him with some hope and community, helping him survive in the tough environment of NYC.

Luis Torres

Luis Torres, 32, came to New York City 13 years ago on a family-based immigrant visa sponsored by his mother and currently holds U.S. residency. With a college degree from the Dominican Republic and a high fluency in English, Luis found work as a translator in a hospital. His work is both challenging and fulfilling, allowing him to use his language skills and education to help others. However, his journey was not without its challenges.

Growing up as a gay man in a conservative neighborhood in Moca, Luis faced constant pressure to conform. His decision to move to the U.S. was driven by both socio-economic aspirations and the need for personal freedom. While his job provides financial stability and a supportive work environment, Luis continues to grapple with the trauma of his past. Luis's fluency in English has been a significant asset, allowing him to excel in his job and build a network of friends and colleagues. However, the memories of his adolescence include meetings with men for anonymous encounters, and in one instance his life was threaten with a knife. His assailant forcing him to hand over his cash and cellular phone. Despite his professional success, Luis struggles with the trauma of his past. The memories of his adolescence haunt him, making it difficult to form intimate relationships. He attends therapy sessions, which help him navigate his mental health challenges.

No longer feeling the need to hide his identity, Luis volunteers with local LGBTQ+ groups, offering support and guidance to other immigrants facing similar struggles. His experience has made him passionate about advocacy and helping others navigate the complexities of life as an LGBTQ+ immigrant. His goal is to obtain U.S. citizenship and continue his work in both the hospital and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and immigrant support. His journey is a testament to his resilience and commitment to making a difference despite his personal hardships.

Discussion

Themes

The analysis of the case studies of gay Dominican immigrant men in New York City revealed several common themes that highlight the intersectional challenges and resilience of this population. These themes include compounded trauma and mental health struggles; the intersectionality of identities; employment, economic hardship, and language barriers; and community support systems, resilience, and hope.

Compounded trauma and mental health struggles

Each individual case study revealed significant trauma experiences that occurred at various stages of migration—pre-migration, in transit, and post-migration—demonstrating the layers of adversity that shape the mental health of gay Dominican immigrant men. For example, Carlos Peralta fled Santo Domingo after enduring severe bullying, physical violence, and community ostracism due to his sexual orientation, only to face a dangerous journey through Guatemala and Mexico, where he risked his life to cross the border. Miguel Rodriguez also recounted harrowing memories of his migration journey; while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, he was physically injured by barbed wire while running to escape threats of gunfire, leaving him with lasting physical and psychological scars. Luis Torres, though he migrated through a family-sponsored visa, spoke of being threatened with a knife during his adolescence when meeting men for anonymous encounters in the Dominican Republic, a memory that continues to impact his ability to form intimate relationships. Juan Martinez described the constant fear of deportation due to his precarious student visa status, coupled with rejection from his family in Santiago. These personal accounts illustrate how pre-migration homophobic violence, familial rejection, and the inherent dangers of migration contribute to layers of trauma. Consistent with the broader literature on cumulative and minority stress (Awad et al., 2021; Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019), these compounded experiences place participants at heightened risk for severe mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

(Meyer, 2003). Despite these challenges, each participant's narrative also reflects the daily struggle to manage this psychological burden while attempting to build a new life in an often-hostile host society.

Intersectionality of identities

The overlapping marginalized identities of being gay, men of color, and immigrants exacerbate the layers of discrimination and social exclusion experienced by these individuals. The case studies clearly illustrate how intersectionality amplifies their vulnerability in ways that single-axis analyses cannot capture. For instance, Carlos Peralta not only navigates the stigma of being openly gay but also faces barriers as an asylum seeker who must prove his fear of persecution while working informally as an independent barber to survive. Miguel Rodriguez's undocumented status adds another layer of precarity: as a young, undocumented gay man with limited education, he struggles to access stable employment and is forced to accept exploitative working conditions at a grocery store. Juan Martinez's story highlights how his status as a student visa holder ties him to precarious, under-the-table work while he contemplates paying someone to marry him just to remain in the country — a desperate decision shaped by the intersection of sexuality, immigrant status, and economic marginalization. Luis Torres, although documented and employed as a hospital translator, continues to confront the psychological effects of growing up gay in a conservative community in the Dominican Republic, a trauma compounded by his experiences of racialization as an immigrant man of color in the U.S. These intersecting identities generate compounded forms of minority stress, as each participant must navigate multiple systems of oppression simultaneously. This dynamic aligns with Skinta and Nakamura's (2021) assertion that intersectionality helps explain how the interplay of racial, sexual, and immigrant identities creates unique challenges more severe than those faced by individuals with only one marginalized identity.

Employment, economic hardship, and language barriers

The documentation status and varying levels of English proficiency among participants significantly shape their employment opportunities, economic stability, and broader integration into life in New York City. Each participant's story illustrates the stark mismatch between their aspirations, educational backgrounds, and the precarious work they are forced to accept. For example, Carlos Peralta, despite having completed secondary school, works long hours as an independent barber with an unstable income while awaiting asylum approval—a process that leaves him in limbo and vulnerable to exploitation. Miguel Rodriguez, who left the Dominican Republic with only an elementary education, remains undocumented and works for low wages at a grocery store, his limited English proficiency making it nearly impossible to negotiate better pay or advocate for himself. Juan Martinez, who arrived on a student visa, has advanced English skills yet is unable to work legally in the U.S., forcing him to take unreported jobs in a cellular phone store while balancing the stress of a visa that could expire at any moment. In contrast, Luis Torres's high level of English proficiency and college degree enabled him to secure a more stable job as a hospital translator, yet even he must navigate subtle workplace discrimination linked to his immigrant status and sexual orientation. These examples show that for gay Dominican immigrant men, documentation status and language proficiency intersect to limit access to fair employment and upward mobility. Without tailored, trauma-informed language education and pathways to legal status, these barriers perpetuate cycles of economic hardship and social exclusion, as reflected in both the individual narratives and broader literature (Schuss, 2018; Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019).

Community support systems, resilience, and hope

The presence of community support systems plays a vital role in helping gay Dominican immigrant men navigate the compounded adversities of homophobic violence, precarious immigration status, economic hardship, and social exclusion. Throughout the case studies, each participant demonstrates how access to LGBTQ+ communities, informal peer networks, and supportive individuals provides critical emotional support, practical resources, and a sense of belonging (Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019). For example, Carlos Peralta finds solace in a tight-knit LGBTQ+ community within his neighborhood, which offers him connection and emotional refuge while he waits for his asylum claim to be processed. Juan Martinez relies on a core group of gay Dominican friends who keep in touch through WhatsApp, sharing strategies to cope with the stress of legal liminality and social isolation. Miguel Rodriguez, despite his undocumented status and limited English, draws hope from local LGBTQ+ organizations that provide him with information about legal rights and English language classes. Luis Torres, who holds residency and stable employment, exemplifies how resilience and hope can evolve into community advocacy—he volunteers with LGBTQ+ groups to support other immigrants navigating similar challenges. Across these narratives, resilience emerges not as an individual trait alone but as a collective process grounded in community ties, peer support, and the aspiration for a better future. Despite their significant hardships, each participant continues to pursue language learning, employment opportunities, and legal pathways that will help them build stable, fulfilling lives. Understanding these layered experiences of support, resilience, and hope is essential for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals committed to developing effective, culturally responsive strategies to serve this multiply marginalized population.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings from the case studies of gay Dominican immigrant men in New York City highlight several critical implications for policy and practice. Addressing the unique challenges faced by this population requires comprehensive and targeted approaches in areas such as mental health support, legal protections, education, and community support.

Culturally responsive, trauma-informed mental health support

Mental health support for gay Dominican immigrant men—and LGBTQ+ immigrants more broadly—must be grounded in culturally sensitive, trauma-informed models that fully recognize the compounded adversities they face. As the case studies illustrate, experiences of pre-migration violence, familial rejection, dangerous transit journeys, and post-migration discrimination create layers of trauma that intersect with stressors linked to race, sexual orientation, and precarious legal status (Awad et al., 2021). To respond effectively, therapists and mental health professionals should receive specialized training on how these intersecting identities shape individual and collective mental health needs. This includes not only understanding the Minority Stress Model but also recognizing the traumatogenic stages of migration and how stigma, isolation, and discrimination compound distress (Skinta and Nakamura, 2021). Incorporating trauma-informed care principles—such as safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, and peer support—alongside cultural responsiveness can help clients process past violence and build coping strategies that honor their linguistic, cultural, and community contexts. Tailored interventions that include bilingual therapy options, partnerships with trusted community organizations, and peer support groups can further strengthen mental health services and reduce barriers to care for this marginalized population.

Education and language support

Education policies must focus on providing comprehensive language education programs that cater to the needs of LGBTQ+ immigrants. Improving English proficiency is crucial for their integration and economic stability. This includes developing language education programs that consider the specific needs and schedules of working immigrants can help them achieve language proficiency more effectively. These programs should also incorporate elements of cultural adaptation and resilience-building (Awad et al., 2021). This includes policies that provide access to higher education for undocumented and asylum-seeking immigrants by providing scholarships, in-state tuition rates, and financial aid options.

Community support and integration

Building supportive communities and networks is vital for the wellbeing and resilience of LGBTQ+ immigrants. Community organizations play a crucial role in providing social support, resources, and advocacy. Supporting community-based organizations that cater to the needs of LGBTQ+ immigrants can help provide essential services such as legal aid, mental health support, and social integration programs (Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019). Encouraging the formation of peer support networks within immigrant communities can foster a sense of belonging and mutual assistance, which are critical for mental health and resilience (Skinta and Nakamura, 2021).

Employment and economic opportunities

Improving access to fair employment opportunities for LGBTQ+ immigrants is essential for their economic stability and integration. Implementing job training and placement programs specifically designed for LGBTQ+ immigrants can help them secure stable and well-paying jobs that match their skills and educational backgrounds (Awad et al., 2021). Addressing the complex needs of LGBTQ+ Dominican immigrants in New York City requires a multifaceted approach that integrates mental health support, legal protections, education, community support, and economic opportunities. By implementing policies and practices that recognize and address their intersecting identities and unique challenges, we can help these individuals achieve better integration and overall well-being.

Limitations and future research

One notable limitation of this study is its reliance on a small, qualitative case study approach. While this method allows for an in-depth, nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of gay Dominican immigrants in New York City, its findings cannot be generalized to all LGBTQ+ immigrant populations or even all gay Dominican immigrants. The highly particular nature of case studies has often been critiqued as being too context-specific to inform broader conclusions. However, as Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, case studies remain essential to building a scientific discipline; without a sufficient number of well-executed cases, a discipline lacks systematic exemplars that make theoretical insights concrete and applicable. Additionally, the sample is limited by its geographic scope and the unique sociopolitical context of New York City, which may offer different resources and challenges than other regions. Future studies should remain mindful of these contextual factors when interpreting or applying these findings.

Building on this study's insights, future research should expand to include a larger and more diverse sample of LGBTQ+ immigrants from different cultural backgrounds, gender identities, and immigration statuses to capture broader patterns and experiences. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper understanding of how trauma, language acquisition, and resilience evolve over time as immigrants navigate changing legal and social landscapes. Comparative studies across cities or regions could reveal how local policies, community resources, and social attitudes influence the integration and wellbeing of queer immigrants. Additionally, research that directly examines the effectiveness of trauma-informed language education programs and community-based mental health interventions for LGBTQ+ immigrants would help to translate these findings into evidence-based policy and practice. Finally, participatory action research that centers the voices of queer immigrants themselves can further illuminate pathways for advocacy and systemic change.

Conclusion

The intersectionality of immigration, language education, and trauma presents significant challenges for LGBTQ+ Dominican immigrants in New York City. This article has explored these

complexities through the detailed case studies of Carlos Hernandez, Juan Martinez, Miguel Rodriguez, and Luis Torres. Their stories illustrate how compounded adversities stemming from their intersecting identities of race, sexual orientation, and immigration status profoundly impact their mental health, social integration, and economic opportunities.

The participants' narratives illustrate experiences of pre-migration violence, in-transit dangers, and post-migration discrimination, which, when considered alongside findings from the broader literature, suggest a heightened risk for severe mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Awad et al., 2021; Meyer, 2003; Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019). These narratives underscore the critical need for trauma-informed and culturally competent mental health care. The intersection of LGBTQ+ identity with racial and immigrant statuses exacerbates the discrimination and social exclusion faced by these individuals. Understanding and addressing these overlapping identities are crucial for developing effective support systems (Skinta and Nakamura, 2021).

The varied documentation statuses of the participants significantly affect their employment opportunities and economic stability. Carlos, who is seeking asylum, Miguel, who is undocumented, and Juan, who is on a student visa, face substantial barriers to securing stable and well-paying jobs. In contrast, Luis, who is a resident and traveled on a family-sponsored visa, has better employment opportunities due to their legal status and higher education. However, all participants still encounter challenges related to their LGBTQ+ identities. Addressing these disparities through policies that provide fair employment opportunities and support economic self-sufficiency is essential (Awad et al., 2021).

Language proficiency is another critical factor for integration. Carlos and Miguel struggle with significant language barriers that hinder their professional growth and daily interactions. On the other hand, Juan and Luis have advanced English skills, which help them secure better employment and navigate their new environment more effectively. Tailored language education programs that consider the specific needs of LGBTQ+ immigrants are vital for their personal and professional development (Rodriguez and Xiong, 2019).

Strong support systems, including community organizations and peer networks, play a vital role in the resilience and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ immigrants. Carlos finds solace in the local LGBTQ+ community, Juan has a core group of LGBTQ+ Dominican friends, Miguel relies on local organizations, and Luis actively volunteers with LGBTQ+ groups. These networks provide emotional support, resources, and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for their integration and mental health (Skinta and Nakamura, 2021).

Despite significant adversities, the participants demonstrate remarkable resilience and hope for the future. Carlos is determined to improve his English and pursue further education, Juan aims to achieve residency and seek better employment opportunities, Miguel wants legal status and pursue education, and Luis aspires to gain citizenship and continue his advocacy work. Their determination to improve their English, secure better employment, and build supportive communities highlights their strength and perseverance (Attia et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the narratives of Carlos, Juan, Miguel, and Luis underscore the importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by gay Dominican immigrant men through an intersectional lens. By acknowledging and addressing the specific needs of this population, policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals can develop more effective and compassionate strategies to support their integration and wellbeing. Continued research is needed to better understand the experiences of additional LGBTQ+ immigrant groups to inform policy development. Policies should focus on providing comprehensive legal protections, access to mental health care, educational opportunities, and fair employment practices. Educators and mental health professionals must receive training in cultural responsive and trauma-informed care to effectively support LGBTQ+ immigrants. Strengthening community-based organizations and peer support networks can provide critical resources and a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ immigrants. Advocacy efforts should focus on protecting their rights and promoting social inclusion. By implementing these recommendations, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ Dominican immigrants and help them build stable, fulfilling lives in their new home.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Jordan Gonzalez, gonzalj6@stjohns.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by St. John's University Internal Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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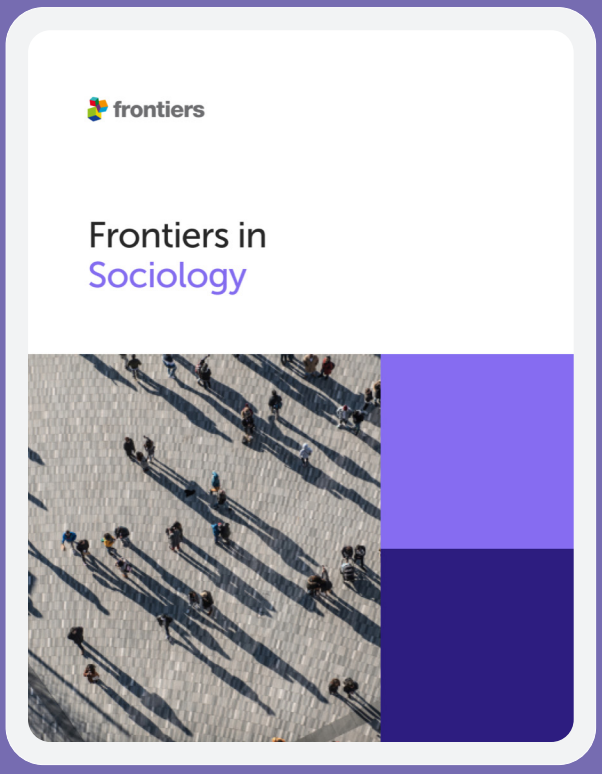

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