Original Article

Navigating the Expression and Management of Identity in Online and Offline Spaces: Voices of Indian LGBTQ+ Youth

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Abstract - Attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community are undergoing transformations all over the globe. Asian nations, including India, are witnessing increased support for the rights of queer communities. Yet, there are several forms of marginalization still in existence. The present study assessed the lived experiences of queer youth living in the metropolitan cities of India and how they expressed and managed their identities within physical and virtual contexts. The avenues of self-expression, inherent risks of identity disclosure, safety measures adopted, and perceived similarities and differences in offline and online spaces were explored. Data is collected through in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with 7 young people who identified as queer. Data is then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings from the interviews offered a nuanced comparison of life in offline and online spaces and how queer identities were negotiated. Findings illustrated that participants perceived specific virtual spaces as more queer-inclusive, informative and diverse than offline settings. Several participants reported that being from affluent, high caste and educated families had served as a protective factor against discrimination within offline spaces. Yet participants practiced selective disclosure of their gender and sexual identities in both virtual and physical spaces. The participants constantly negotiated the extent to which they could reveal their authentic selves, with many of their decisions tied to safety concerns. The participants' narratives reflected online spaces offering distinct advantages, including the feeling of safety, understanding, and gaining information.

Keywords - Identities, Indians, LGBTQ+, Social networking sites, Youth.

1. Introduction

India is experiencing a gradual increase in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, although prejudice remains prevalent in various forms. Pride parades started in India several years ago, and now most major cities, including New Delhi and Mumbai, organize Pride Parades annually. In a recent judgment, the Supreme Court of India affirmed that same-sex couples are entitled to the social benefits offered to traditional families (Teoh, 2022). Many non-profit organizations serve the LGBTQ+ community and advocate for social justice. Yet, same-sex marriages remain illegal, which in turn makes the joint adoption of children impossible. A study on the attitude of medical students towards homosexuality indicated that 15.9% of respondents believed homosexuality to be an illness; 24.8% considered homosexuals neurotic, 28.1% considered homosexuals promiscuous, and 8.2% thought that they posed a danger to children (Kar et al., 2018).

The visibility of a community is an important variable in deconstructing myths and misconceptions. In nations where the queer community continues to be stigmatized, social media platforms can play a particularly powerful role in fostering visibility. These platforms have enabled members of the queer community to voice their experiences and assert their rights. The COVID-19 pandemic played a critical role in enhancing the significance of virtual spaces among the youth for purposes such as information seeking, networking, self-expressing and garnering social support. Social networking sites (SNSs), in particular, allowed people to stay connected regardless of lockdowns. They offered the youth a way to overcome barriers such as geographical distances and differences in time zones. Social media platforms have rapidly changed the landscape within which young people negotiate their social and professional lives.

Researchers have taken a keen interest in the functions that virtual spaces play for young people who are marginalized on account of their gender or sexual orientation. It has been found that for LGBTQ+ youth, the internet provides answers about sexuality (Hillier, Mitchell & Ybarra, 2012) and serves as a platform for advocating social inclusion, equality and justice. It allows LGBTQ+ youth to connect with others, often same-age peers, who are in similar situations (Dehaan et al., 2013), thereby fostering a sense of support and belonging.

Identity establishment and identity management are important developmental milestones for all young people but take on special significance in the face of social discrimination faced by non-heteronormative individuals. D'Augelli's (1994) identity development model is useful here as it is grounded in a social constructionist view of sexual orientation and believes that cultural and political contexts shape the construction of sexual identity. The model presents sexual identity development in the form of six steps, beginning with exiting a heterosexual identity to developing an LGBTQ+ status and LGBTQ+ social identity. The individual then moves to becoming an LGBTQ+ offspring, developing an LGBTQ+ intimacy status and finally entering an LGBTQ+ community. These steps entail the possibility of moving back and forth based on one's experiences. Acceptance of one's identity as a queer person may fluctuate as individuals continue to explore and expand their sense of self (Jamil et al., 2009). Social media platforms can be assumed to play a role during the above-mentioned steps.

McKenna and Bargh (1998) found that those participating in sexual identity-based online groups experience greater self-acceptance and feel less socially isolated, resulting in a sense of "demarginalization". In the absence of family support, online groups and social media offer accessible alternatives by providing a community on the outside. Numerous digital influencers from the LGBTQ+ community have been working to create awareness and a digital ecosystem of support. Participants can come out, describe their experiences of discrimination, and share other private information related to their gender and/or sexual identity on social networks (McConatha, 2015). They can also access positive role models. As young people become more comfortable in their own right, they can use social media platforms to support others in their community. Used alongside existing physical organizations working towards the goal, social media may be the ideal space for advocating LGBTQ+ rights while maintaining the need for privacy and anonymity (Dey, 2019).

Fox and Ralston (2016) have suggested that social networking sites serve as informal learning environments for queer individuals, especially during the formative evolution of their identities. Through interviews, the researchers found multiple educational uses of seeking information online, all of which were more common during the coming out process: traditional learning (such as gathering information on LGBTQ+ related issues), social learning (e.g., observing role models or other LGBTQ+ individuals), and experiential learning (e.g., experimenting with dating sites). Participants also reported another function of teaching or sharing information about the self with others as an LGBTQ+ individual. Several aspects of social media, including visibility, anonymity and interactivity, enabled such learning.

While specific social media platforms can be empowering experiences for people of the LGBTQ+

community, many spaces can be unsafe. LGBTQ+ youth have been found to be two to three times more vulnerable to cyberbullying than non- LGBTQ+ youth. Furthermore, transgender youth, persons with "other" genders, and cisgender sexual minority females report higher levels of online and text-based victimization than cisgender male sexual minority youth. Experiencing online victimization has been associated with several negative outcomes, including decreased psychological well-being (Glsen et al., 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2016). LGBTQ+ persons have reported experiences of online victimization transitioning to in-person bullying (Varjas et al., 2013). Alarmingly, online victimization can prove to be even more intense than in-person victimization due to perpetrators feeling less inhibited and the high visibility of information placed on social media platforms. Considering these experiences, researchers have sought to locate identity management strategies used by queer youth to increase online safety. These include monitoring online self-expression, using privacy and security controls, strategically managing friendship networks, creating multiple accounts, and curating and editing personal photographs.

It must be noted that these strategies require a good deal of labor—both traditional labor with respect to time and effort and emotional labor with respect to self-presentation. On some platforms, tools such as privacy customization enable users to have a privacy setting for their overall presence and also have the ability to share information with or block information from specific individuals in their network. However, privacy and security settings are often difficult to navigate and imperfect concerning information control. Unsurprisingly queer youth report a variety of outness across different SNSs and network subgroups (e.g., family, peers). Users tended to be more out on "gay-specific" SNSs than "general audience" SNSs (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012). The reasons for limiting SNS outness include homophobia, conservative family and hometown friends, religiosity-related backlash, and professional consequences (Fox & Warber, 2015). Talbot et al. (2020) found that LGBTQ+ students used social media not only to express their identities but also to conceal and protect them. LGBTQ+ students' online identities are multiple, situated and bound to specific platforms, with some alternatives offering a space where students may feel more comfortable being their authentic selves.

In recent years, India has witnessed a massive increase in the use of social media. This has allowed the concealed subject of queerness to make a transition from relative invisibility to visibility. In the face of low levels of family support, online groups and social media offer Indian queer youth accessible alternatives to form communities. Numerous digital influencers are working towards creating awareness and a digital ecosystem to support each other. Several platforms, including Instagram and Twitter, have emerged to offer spaces of self-expression to Indians in the community. Yet, literature on identity management strategies in the Indian context remains sparse.

The present study assessed the lived experiences of queer youth living in the metropolitan cities of India and how they express and manage their identities both within physical and virtual spaces. The avenues of self-expression, inherent risks, safety measures adopted, and perceived similarities and differences in offline and online spaces were investigated. The study partly relied on identity mapping to answer the research questions. Identity-mapping activities have been successfully employed in previous research designed to elicit detailed discussions of multiple personal and social identities and how they relate to one another in the context of a focal lived experience (e.g., Cruwys et al., 2016; Narváez et al., 2009; Sirin & Fine, 2007). This study adopts a strength-based perspective and provides the opportunity to highlight positive development and well-being based on identifying and supporting existing resources (Jennings, 2003). As much as the study examines the valid struggles faced by people in the LGBTQ+ community, it also elicits information regarding resources that help them express and manage identities safely.

2. Materials and Method

2.1. Participant

The research used snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) to recruit 7 participants who identified themselves to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community. The participants expressed different sexual/romantic identities, including pansexual-aromantic, queer-gay and 'free, accepting, boundless.' The participants were undergraduate students (mean age = 20 years) who hailed from urban cities (Jaipur, Delhi and Kochi) and were living with their parents at the time of the study. Most participants used three or more social networking sites (including Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit and Facebook) and expressed different ways of engaging with their friends and followers. Six participants were out and open regarding their identities on certain online platforms. One was partially open and preferred to advocate as an ally. Some ways chosen by participants to express their sexual/gender minority identity online were to mention their pronouns in their bios, actively share posts related to the queer community, interact with fandom pages and discuss romantic interests.

2.2. Interview Protocol

Data for the present study was gathered through in-depth interviews with the participants. The interview schedule was based on a review of existing literature and contemporary issues with respect to the queer community in the country. Certain segments of the interview schedule (identity mapping, challenges, stress and coping, reflections and goals) were culturally adapted from the works of Frost et al. (2020). Particular emphasis was placed on eliciting information on the intersection of different identities held by the participants. Questions were broad and developed to elicit as much information as possible. All the interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded with the consent of the participants. The various components of the interview are presented below. Considerable freedom was practiced in conducting the

interviews when warranted by the natural flow of conversation.

First, participants were asked to complete an identity mapping activity. Participants were told: *"For this activity, please use this page as a starting point for listing the identities and roles that describe who you are. You can write words or phrases that represent different aspects of yourself. These might include social identities or labels related to gender, race, sexuality, class, occupation, different roles in your life, or any words or phrases that describe you."* After participants completed their drawing, interviewers read the identity labels and discussed them with the participants. To prompt participants to reflect on their experiences of their intersecting core identities, interviewers asked participants a series of questions repeating versions of the following: "Tell me about your experience of being [SEXUAL IDENTITY] in the [RACE/ETHNICITY/GENDER] community." These prompts were designed according to Bowleg's (2008) recommendation that, in order to best assess intersectionality experiences, researchers should ask about them directly. The final segment in this section explored the various online communities that participants belonged to, the ways in which these spaces interacted with one another, and the differences that participants felt between their online communities and offline ones. Participants were asked specific questions about the challenges and stresses they faced while representing themselves online and how they coped with them, as well as their experiences with online advocacy movements, privacy settings on various platforms, available social support and their use of sexual minority community resources both online and offline. The interviews lasted a median of 57 minutes; the longest interview lasted 75 minutes, and the shortest was 43 minutes in length.

2.3. Researcher Positionality

All three researchers identify themselves as heterosexual cisgender women (she/her). The interest of one researcher in conducting this study was generated through witnessing the experiences of friends from the LGBTQ+ community. The second researcher wanted to use this academic medium to challenge myths and stigma related to queer identities. The third researcher sees herself as a strong ally of the LGBTQ+ community.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was secured from each participant, and every effort was made to maintain the anonymity of respondents. The researchers did not view or access any participant's social media accounts during or outside the interviews. Careful attention was paid to the identity language used by each participant. Moreover, sensitive language was used throughout the interview, including giving appropriate trigger warnings and the option to skip certain questions. The researchers acknowledged their relative position of power with respect to participants and made sure that the participants' voices were not marginalized in any way. The interviewers conducted an

emotional wellness check to ensure that the participants left the interview situation without any distress or unease.

2.5. Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) based on an inductive approach to theme development. Braun and Clarke (2012) have proposed a six-phase process (familiarizing oneself with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report) which can facilitate the analysis. While the phases are organized in a logical, sequential order, the analysis is not a linear process. Rather, it is iterative, requiring the researcher to move back and forth through the phases. The process of coding and theme development takes place flexibly and organically. Themes are formed by organizing codes around a 'central organizing concept'. The reflexive approach to thematic analysis highlights the researcher's role in producing knowledge. RTA is considered a reflection of the researcher's analysis of the data conducted at the intersections of the dataset, their assumptions and their analytical skills/resources (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It is fully expected that no two researchers will intersect this criterion in the same way. The researchers in the present study also adopted a critical perspective during the data analysis to examine the mechanisms that informed the construction of meaning by the participants. This allowed interpretations of meaning to, at times, move further beyond those explicitly communicated by participants (Braun & Clarke 2012).

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the narratives collected during the interview process elicited four major themes that focused on the identity expression and management efforts engaged in by the participants. These themes are (i) Navigating Queerness in Physical spaces, (ii) Responding to Resistance, (iii) Locating the self in the virtual world, and (iv) Remaining safe in virtual worlds.

3.1. I just told them, 'I think I am bi-sexual'. -Navigating Queerness in Physical Spaces

This theme discusses the experiences the participants had within their immediate physical environments with respect to their gender/sexual orientation. These physical spaces mainly included interactions with family members and with peers, friends and teachers in educational spaces. The interactions emerged to be complex in nature, entailing negative and positive experiences. Further, the extent to which families accepted their children's queer identities differed for each participant. Some families had embraced queerness relatively soon.

"My family also, within two days of coming out to myself, I came out to them. Because I think in the pandemic, we ended up spending so much time together that we were just more honest with each other. And there had been breakdowns and fights. I just told them, 'I think I am bi-sexual.' and they were pretty alright about it." (Chetna, 20 years)

Participants often attributed these reactions to their educated and relatively affluent family members. They felt that belonging to the upper class offered protection against queer-based stigmatization. College and close friends had also provided a safe space to some participants where they could talk about their identities and feelings freely and without fear of judgment.

"But coming to college, I was given a space and opportunity where I could be myself. And I met other people who were also members of the LGBT community. So, it created a small sort of a safe space where I could talk about (my) crushes openly." (Bhavya, 21 years)

For the participants, being able to be open about who they were was a liberating and enriching experience.

"When I'm with my friends, who knows, I'm pansexual. And they're okay with it. They've been the most freeing times. For example, when you're drunk, you feel this lightheadedness and that you're not anxious about things anymore. That is how I feel when I'm with friends. You know it's this lightheadedness; there is no restriction. There's no inhibition. Because I can feel free to be myself." (Tara, 21 years)

At the same time, certain settings, such as the schools the participants had belonged to, had been largely queer-phobic. Further, some peers had demonstrated behaviours based on queer stereotypes, remained insensitive to pronoun usage or used queer-phobic humor. In many such cases, the participants had ceased interacting with such peers. Participants also reported knowing other people of the LGBTQ+ community, whom their friends had abandoned, once they came out as queer.

"In school, people would question how the girls who I was friends with could remain friends with me while I was queer because a lot of people have this idea in their head that being gay or being queer means you're sexualizing your friends, which couldn't be further from the truth. I clarified that I wasn't a lesbian; I was pansexual. But they kept insisting that I was a lesbian." (Aanya, 18 years)

Some participants found themselves alone in physical spaces, with little or no exposure to others who were non-binary. They had seldom met others who shared their particular intersection of identities.

"I think that my sexual identity is queer and my race, I'm a brown person. So, I think it's really conflicting because I haven't seen a lot of queer brown representation in the media or around me. I'm from Maharashtra. I'm Marathi, and I've never met a queer female who is Marathi." (Sanvi, 20 years).

Although parental acceptance offers immense support in developing resilience in children still coming to terms with their LGBTQ+ identity (Rosario et al., 2016), a few participants expressed discomfort in disclosing their identities to their families. They expected to receive queerphobic responses based on their past experiences and family interference in their matters. One parent who knew

about their children's sexual/gender identities asked them not to "*broadcast your queer identity everywhere.*"

"I'm from a Kshatriya Hindu family, and most of my family isn't very conservative. But they are, you know, they are a little bit conservative when it comes to things like sexuality, and they're okay with it happening in other places, and they are okay with seeing it happen like the legalization. But at home, (sexuality) not something that you should address, or it's something that you joke about." (Tara, 21 years)

Previous research has found that families with a strong emphasis on traditional values (e.g., placing importance on marriage, religion and the need to have children) tend to be less accepting of sexual minority orientation (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). The participants' responses indicate a steadfast presence of heteronormative notions within certain settings with little or no space for any other type of love or attraction between individuals, except for male-female love. Although homosexuality and gender fluidity have been part of India's history for centuries, the colonial practise of criminalizing same-sex relationships appears to have strongly impacted people's attitudes even today. Legislation decriminalizing same-sex love has been very recent, and the social outlook, especially among older generations, may take more time to change. Within the Indian context, parents may express alarm at their child's decision to 'come out' partly from a worry about how their children will adapt in society and the ridicule they will have to face due to their sexual and gender orientation, including missing out on the chance to enter matrimony. Being queer in India means no right to marry or have children. It is possible that the legalization of same-sex marriage in India will encourage parents to have more accepting attitudes towards their child's sexual and gender orientation. There also seems to be a strong need for mental health professionals in the country to help families recognize the critical role their reactions to a loved one's sexual orientation or gender identity can play in the family's well-being. This could include addressing the positive aspects of being the parent of a queer child. Previous research has found such aspects to include personal growth, positive emotions, activism, social connection and closer relationships (Gonzales et al., 2012).

3.2. Responding to Resistance

This theme focuses on the impacts of stigma on the participants' internal worlds and how they had come to accept their queer identities despite exposure to environments that resisted diversity with respect to gender and or sexual orientation. One outcome of the heteronormative attitudes that the participants encountered was internalized queerphobia. Participants had struggled with self-acceptance and had been anxious with respect to coming out. Internalized homophobia has been defined as the inward direction of societal homophobic attitudes at an individual level (Ventriglio et al., 2021). It has been associated with mental health problems, stress, repression, discordance, clinical depression and a higher risk of suicide (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). Internalized

homophobia is characterized by an intrapsychic conflict between desires and experiences of same-sex affection and feeling a need to be heterosexual (Herek, 2004). While it is commonly experienced in the process of LGB identity development, overcoming it is essential to developing a healthy self-concept. As a result of the stereotypes that surrounded them, participants were cautious about how they behaved around their friends.

"Because of this prejudice that queer people are always sexualizing their friends, it makes me really uncomfortable. And sometimes, I don't even feel like hugging my friends. Because I'm scared that, you know, they overthink, and I overthink about that. So that really, really sucks because I am a really affectionate person. And there was this one time where one of my friends was hugging me. And someone said, 'Oh, don't hug her. She is a pervert.' So that was like really, really bad." (Aanya, 18 years)

As there were risks in being open about one's sexual or gender identity, participants felt it best to limit their expressions to specific spaces in their lives and relied upon selective disclosure.

"I am proud of myself, and I feel comfortable with my identity. I think everyone needs a platform or place where they can be comfortable and they feel safe expressing themselves. But I can't do that with everyone, especially my family, so I think it's necessary to maintain or create a separate identity at the places where I can be myself." (Sanvi, 20 years)

It has been suggested that for queer people, decisions about the concealment and disclosure of gender/sexual identities are ongoing in nature. Concealment has, however, been linked to a reduced sense of social support and well-being (Lloren & Parini, 2017), along with increased stress and anxiety. On the other hand, disclosing one's identity can be a healthy step, enabling a feeling of authenticity as long as one remains protected from heterosexism (Brady et al., 2022). Previous research shows that disclosure decisions are guided by two potentially opposing fundamental psychological needs (Clair et al., 2005; Jones & King, 2014). Individuals are motivated to find a balance between differentiating themselves from others and fulfilling their need for uniqueness while simultaneously feeling sufficiently embedded within a social group to satisfy their need for belonging. A factor often considered in the decision to disclose is "anticipated acceptance": the extent to which an LGBTQ+ individual believes that an interaction partner would accept their concealable stigmatized identity, should they disclose it. People with a high level of anticipated acceptance are more likely to elicit disclosure, and people with a low level of anticipated acceptance are less likely (King et al., 2017).

Several interpersonal characteristics may increase anticipated acceptance and thus disclosure likelihood: others who are perceived as having knowledge, being sympathetic, or being similar (e.g., possess the same

stigmatized identity; Clair et al., 2005); relationships characterized by high degrees of (emotional) closeness and interpersonal trust (Derlega et al., 1993).

The participants also spoke to various factors that had helped them to understand their own queer identities over a period of time. However, it must be acknowledged that several participants were still exploring aspects of their gender and sexual orientations. One such factor was increased awareness about the gender and sexuality spectra.

"The more I read about it, the more people I met who made me confident or who accepted me in the way they did. And I realized that, okay, I need to get rid of all my internalized homophobia or the way I talk about these things, and then only I can go on and advocate against it." (Tara, 21 years)

Exposure to higher education also played a facilitative role.
"So, sociology teaches us that gender is a social construct. The categories of men and women are not natural. So that has really helped me in my process of coming… like understanding my own identity… to deviate from the common sense understanding of society, of gender. It has helped me accept and understand my identity." (Bhavya, 21 years)

For some, "life-changing" affirmative therapy had provided a safe space. Affirmative therapy celebrates the authenticity of LGBTQ+ individuals (Bieschke et al., 2007), promotes healthy relationships by affirming individuals' sexual and gender identities, fosters self-determination and highlights personal strengths (Crisp & McCave, 2007).

"In general, therapy was life-changing because my therapist understood immediately, you know. But she realized also that she couldn't just tell me; I had to realize it in my own right. She pointed out the thought pattern, that which I once acknowledged, actually was more rational." (Chetna, 20 years).

India's Mental Health Care Act of 2017 requires medical professionals to affirm the rights of people from communities marginalized by gender and sexuality and to develop and provide appropriate services. There are now a small number of therapists within India that cater to the needs of queer clients by providing safe spaces. At the same time, it must be noted that access to such therapists is limited or non-existent for a large proportion of the LGBTQ+ community due to factors such as high cost. This is particularly important because many queer people lose financial support from their families due to their gender and sexual orientation. The lack of mental health services penetration in rural India poses an additional challenge. As they had come to embrace themselves, the participants had tried on various occasions to assert the rights of the queer community. However, they found that others could be highly non-receptive to their efforts and decided to unburden themselves from the task of advocating all the time.

"I used to be very into, like, educating people. But then, after a while, you understand that some people aren't just aren't ready. She will have to learn to, like, you know, stop wasting your energy. Yeah, people have to do the whole learning and unlearning process on their own; it can't be able, like, how much can you educate people?" (Aanya, 18 years)

3.3. Locating the Self in the Virtual World

As mentioned earlier, participants were regular members of specific online communities. A key reason for participants to seek online safe spaces was the lack of Indian queer representation in their immediate offline settings and popular media. Media representation has been greatly influential in providing role models and inspiration for coming out and self-realization (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Mixer, 2018). However, the prevalence of whiteness as the normative representation adds to the already experiencing invisibility in both racial and queer spaces (Logie & Rwigema, 2014).
"... I'm a brown person...my sexual identity that is queer and my race. So, I think it's really conflicting because I haven't seen a lot of queer brown representation in media or around me. Even during my childhood, I didn't see a lot of people like me out there." (Sanvi, 20 years)

In this context, interaction with relatable queer spaces online provided support and reassurance to the participants.

"The most online communities that I'm a part of consist queer females, and they are mostly from Asian countries. I feel like I'm comfortable enough to share my identity or talk about my experiences with them because they can also relate to it in a way." (Sanvi, 20 years)

The participants mentioned the clear benefits of participating in online communities. One of these benefits was the ability to choose who they interacted with.

"I cannot control what sort of people I meet offline. And what sort of people I have to work with offline? So, I tend to control what sort of people I meet online. These online groups because they are a safe space. Not threatening and who we can be open with. So, in these spaces, I am myself, and I am out about my sexuality and everything." (Tara, 21 years)

Online communities increase the chances of meeting people undergoing similar experiences as one's self. Some online communities also incorporated offline meetings that enhanced the group's sense of belonging with each other. The anonymity, ease of texting, and increased opportunities to witness and interact with diverse people were mentioned as some of the advantages of virtual platforms. Virtual spaces were seen to be informative, especially with regard to the gender-sexuality spectra.

"And Instagram has really like helped me like get in touch with, let's say, communities, queer community which gives support to people. When I was coming out as trans, I contacted an (online) community, and I asked them about the process in India. So that way, access has increased." (Bhavya, 21 years)

These spaces made participants feel heard and understood.

"I feel like I'm comfortable enough to share my identity or talk about my experiences with them because they can also relate to it in a way. And I don't feel strange when I'm with them or when I'm talking with them, because I know they will understand me and they will know what I'm talking about. Or even if they haven't experienced something similar to it, they will try to understand" (Sanvi, 20 years)

Online spaces also provided several ongoing opportunities for self-expression and access to mental health resources.

"Therapists, even in India, are homophobic. It is very difficult to define LGBTQ affirmative therapists. So, I have found those through (online) communities. When it comes to resources on how you need help, I have found organizations, like Instagram pages, where if I reported, Okay, my friend is in a household which is not accepting of her identity, and this might be threatening her life, might be under no danger because of this. They have contact with NGOs. They have found her a place to live. They have removed her from that." (Tara, 21 years)

Yet participants remained interested in engaging with safe offline spaces due to their own specific advantages, such as the presence of family and the ability to speak up and be heard.

"I think offline is a bit more about me. It's a bit more about personal troubles, and online is a bit more about listening to other people and learning more. Because you learn about trans people, you learn about different labels, different sexualities, and different people have different casts. A lot of people are speaking up on social media nowadays. So, I think social media is a place for me to listen. And offline friends are a place for me to be heard as well." (Diya, 18 years)

These findings support past literature that has shown social media to have become a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth to explore issues of sexuality and gender (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Social media provides various kinds of platforms for queer youth to learn about identity-specific issues and the coming out process in ways that may not be possible offline (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2015). Interactions with online communities can provide access to role models, information and sources of social support. They also provide the opportunity to support other queer people within their online networks. Given that many social media sites allow for both consumption and creation of content, they provide queer people with shared spaces which can be secure and nurturing. Austin et al. (2020) found that transgender youth could engage meaningfully with others as their authentic selves through online spaces, often for the first time. These experiences fostered well-being, healing, and growth through several processes, including finding an escape from stigma and violence, experiencing belonging and feeling hope.

However, just like the physical spaces the participants occupied, virtual worlds also posed challenges. For example, forums focussing on women's rights and claiming to be feminist were not always queer-inclusive.

"So, there are multiple kinds of queer community. There are multiple kinds of feminists on the internet. Mostly the feminist I follow, they are queer inclusive. They talk about transwomen while talking about women. But that doesn't mean all feminist pages on the internet are like that. There would be feminist pages, who exclude the queer community. So yeah, there is conflict." (Bhavya, 21 years)

Social media evoked social comparisons that had implications for the participants' self-worth. Due to safety concerns, participants had to thus make careful choices about the social media platforms they used for personal and professional purposes.

"I think safety is the most important reason because you don't know like who could be homophobic...People get aggressive... especially homophobic people transphobic people... they can get abusive and rude. So, it's mostly due to safety that I maintain a very small group on Instagram." (Bhavya, 21 years)

Comments on social media also had the potential to turn extremely toxic.

"You go to like any other influencer's page, and you see them make a post about feminism, the comments are sometimes so triggering, where you see men and women speak against feminism, and say the most ridiculous things sometimes, and it's just so toxic." (Diya, 18 years)

Participants encountered microaggressions on specific social networking sites. Certain work-based platforms provided no spaces for safe identity expression. This is significant given that inadvertent disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity can lead to potential harassment or employment discrimination (Birnholtz et al., 2014). Some participants mentioned being trolled and receiving hate comments online.

"On Facebook, maybe a few times it's happened that people I don't really know, but I'm friends with them, like, they were in the same school as me, they have come into my like DMS and being like, stop sharing about you, your identity, we don't want to like, know about it, you don't have to force your lifestyle on us" (Bhavya, 21 years)

"A lot of people have told me that I am too much that I push too much about queer stuff. And I should really

stop because it might annoy other people. And because other people might not be comfortable with it, and a lot of people question me as to why I do that and not curious, I genuinely want to know why. But you know, why are you always on about this All day?" (Aanya, 18 years)

Unfortunately, online hate against the queer community is ubiquitous and yet is seldom taken seriously. This is surprising, given the immense impact it can have on the targets of the hate. Online hate has clear and identifiable impacts, including anger, sadness, anxiety, shame and paranoia (Hubbard, 2020). Trans people are even more likely to experience heightened levels of threat and vulnerability in online spaces (Walters et al., 2017). Acts of online hate are rarely reported (Hubbard, 2020), contributing to its perpetuation. The virulent nature of some of the comments posted online has been attributed to the potential for anonymity for the perpetrator (Williams, 2019). It may be noted that the queerphobia faced by the participants did not deter them from wanting to give back to the LGBTQ+ community. Broadly, the strength of online communities was seen to lie in the safe and non-judgmental space they provided for the participants, who, in turn, wanted to contribute to this circle of inclusivity. For them, helping another individual implied a great sense of satisfaction.

3.4. Remaining Safe in Virtual Worlds

As identity disclosure could be risky even online, some participants preferred to stay in virtual 'bubbles', being out and open only with specific people. Participants were particular about who they would invite into their virtual worlds.

"I don't, let's say heterosexual men to follow me, even though there might be some common mutuals between us. I am very particular that most of my followers are girls because they are less aggressive. And also another strategy I use is...who I let see...who sees my post." (Bhavya, 21 years)

They looked to admit people who belonged to the queer community and were supportive of the rights of queer people.

"I haven't interacted with people who are outside of the community; I already created this bubble for myself. I haven't directly experienced anything towards me because I've already taken precautions, maybe because I've seen people experiencing it, and so I have this fear that I don't want to experience it." (Sanvi, 20 years)

Disengagement from potentially threatening individuals or situations was also practised.

"When you are from a minority group, you will always face hate comments or like people being mean to you unnecessarily. And few (queer) people do engage with it, but most of us block it. We make fun of the comment and block it. Because engaging can be very exhausting and tiring for us." (Bhavya, 21 years)

"I had a friend that I've known since preschool. When I tried to explain to him that gender is fluid, he was like, 'No, it isn't'. So, I had a couple of conversations with him about it. And he kept like crossing boundaries, and it would just be like through snide jokes or whatever. But I gave him a couple of chances because I've known him for a long time. And I felt a little bad about cutting him off. But then I did; I just took them off my end. So, I don't him follow him anymore. And he doesn't follow me." (Diya, 18 years)

Participants were cautious about the stories they posted on pages that their family members could see.

"I am very cautious. I rarely use the account where my family is. So, I go to the Instagram account where my family is, and I think, 'Oh, this post, I can put" if it's something about...there is a video UN has made about transgender visibility day. And it was very nice. It was very subtle; it was not very outright. I posted in, nobody replied to it, but nobody opposed it." (Tara, 21 years)

The negative experiences on social media were sometimes handled either by deleting the app for a while or focusing on the pro-social benefits of posting online.

"And they were friends on Instagram, and they kept going through my stories, and they came up to me, they told me, okay, your stories have helped me be more educated about the issue, they've helped me be more confident, and it has made them realize that my account, or talking to me is a safe thing to do. So that way, I've come to know more people than ever. They can come to me, and they will not feel alone. Which means more than anything, which I think, has an effect more than the hate I get." (Tara, 21 years)

Over time, participants began to re-appraise negativity on the internet, not as their own fault but as that of others who could not understand them.

"I think it has made me care less about other people's opinions on what I post, you know because they don't really get to have a say in what I do on my account. And if they don't like it, they can mute me or unfollow me; that is on them, it is not on me." (Aanya, 18 years)

Some participants adopted multiple identities on various social networking sites. One participant mentioned maintaining 4 different profiles on Instagram. One was a public account for posting poetry, and the other was an account for family (wherein they hesitated to share anything related to their LGBTQ+ identity). The third account was curated for advocacy (where they were not out and open), and the fourth one, called a "spam account", was with selected followers where they expressed their identity freely. Such elaborate management came with its costs, including the excessive effort required, anxiety and fatigue.

"Earlier, when I had two accounts, one was for my family, and another one was for my friends and other community members. And I remember that I used to get really scared and checked twice everything I posted. I was paranoid that what if I accidentally, you know, shared on the family one. And what will happen if they get to know about me, or what if my family members find out about this account?" (Sanvi, 20 years)

Talbot et al. (2020) found that while it was tiring and stressful to maintain more than one account, it did provide queer person control over which audiences had access to information about their gender/sexual identity. Although the participants had taken a number of steps to cope with the challenges of online spaces, it has been reported that software companies need to do more to ensure the safety of the queer community.

According to a report by GLAAD, an LGBTQ+ media advocacy group (2002), social media platforms need to create safer products and policies and enforce those policies by closely monitoring violations of existing policies. One existing problem identified is that Facebook, Instagram and YouTube still do not prohibit misgendering and deadnaming, which refer to intentionally using the wrong pronouns and name for a transgender person. GLAAD's report also urges Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube to expressly prohibit content that promotes conversion therapy. It calls upon social media platforms to ban targeted advertising based on users' sexual orientation or gender identity. It urges YouTube to make a stronger commitment to address the wrongful removal and demonetization of LGBTQ+ creators' content. It is, therefore, clear that a lot more action needs to be taken to strengthen virtual spaces to better serve the needs of the queer community.

4. Conclusion
This study examined LGBTQ+ Indian youth's expression and management of identity in physical and virtual spaces. Intersectionality revealed that affluence, high caste, and education provided protection against discrimination. Online spaces offered advantages like safety, understanding, and information, helping participants embrace their LGBTQ+ identities. However, online forums weren't always safe and weren't considered equal substitutes for offline spaces. Safety was maintained through blocking, disengaging, and using multiple identities. Participants sometimes choose to withhold their LGBTQ+ identities online to avoid prejudice, but this had negative psychological impacts, including a sense of loss and isolation. This could be seen as a strategic move but also signified oppression (Frost, 2011; Fuller et al., 2009).

This study has several limitations, including reliance on self-reports and possibly missing aspects of participants' experiences. Data collection occurred online, potentially overlooking non-verbal cues. Qualitative research carries the risk of researcher bias, though authors attempted reflexivity. The small sample focused on metropolitan residents; future studies should include diverse backgrounds.

This study has important implications for creating LGBTQ+-friendly social networks and can guide policy-making to improve the visibility of marginalized communities. Further research may investigate non-queer individuals' attitudes toward LGBTQ+ expression on social media. Additionally, exploring how different platforms impact LGBTQ+ youth's identity expression and considering social media's role during life transitions is essential.

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