



Research article

Exploring the Intersectionality of Cisgender Queer Women in Non-WEIRD Contexts

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Abstract

The specific challenges faced by cisgender queer women navigating discrimination and marginalization, particularly in non-WEIRD contexts, are rarely addressed in academic literature. This study aims to understand the nuanced experiences of cisgender queer women residing in non-WEIRD contexts, with a particular focus on the intersections of identity, cultural influences, self-acceptance, prejudice, and social location. Drawing on theories like intersectionality, the research highlights the complex interplay between various dimensions of identity and how they shape lived realities. Using a sample of young adults aged 18 to 29 who identify as cisgender queer women, it thematically explores the influence of social and cultural backgrounds on participants' experiences of sexuality. The findings shed light on the persistent prejudice and stereotyping these women face, rooted in both their sexual orientation and cultural context. By centering these intersections, the research emphasizes the importance of multidimensional approaches in social inquiry and advocacy, fostering greater inclusivity and support for cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts.

Keywords: intersectionality, cisgender queer women, non-WEIRD contexts, cultural identity, self-acceptance, prejudice, stereotyping, thematic analysis.

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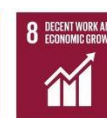
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Introduction

Queerness in India has revived its dignity and acceptance following the iconic verdict of decriminalization of Article 377. Wandrekar and Nigudkar (2020, pp. 26–36) found that 52.9% of men who have sex with men (MSMs) studied were found to have some psychiatric morbidity. However, not a single MSM individual with mental health issues was reported to be engaging in any current treatment. In this same study, sexual minority women reported that they typically avoid mental health services because of the stigma of mental illness, fear of negative medical interventions, and previous unfavorable experiences of these services (p. 27).

Social media platforms provide a space for self-expression and community building and provide access to information and like-minded individuals that may not be available offline (Gaur et al., 2023). However, they can also be a source of hate and abuse. When coupled with the lack of support from family and social circles, the potential for online abuse can make the process of finding information and building community a difficult and potentially dangerous endeavor. Parental acceptance and support are crucial in helping queer youth navigate these challenges and maintain their mental health. Similarly, a sense of community and safe spaces act as protection (Tripathi & Talwar, 2022, pp. 23–35). In 2018, the Indian Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality, a significant victory for the LGBTQ+ community.

The idea of discrimination towards queer folk extends beyond the realm of social acceptance, having implications on care received in hospitals or in terms of renting a house, making financial decisions, and on aspects of individual's lives such as marriage as the law and policy-making bodies create and maintain non-inclusive laws (Casanova-Perez et al., 2022, pp. 275–284). According to Boehmer (2002, pp. 1125–1130), this underrepresentation is due to multiple factors such as stigma, gender stereotypes, assumptions, and male-centric scientific models. He also talks about how the lack of uniform definitions and measures for LGBTQ+ persons, such as behavior, identity, and desire, limits the generalizability of study results.

The theoretical framework employed in this study encompasses intersectionality, social location, and the intricacies of being non-WEIRD in non-Western contexts, all of which collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of cisgender queer women today.

The study is placed in a non-WEIRD context, a cultural context outside of the Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, which are overrepresented in research studies. These non-WEIRD contexts encompass a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that are varied compared to WEIRD contexts.

Similarly, Duong (2012) delves into the importance of looking at the more extensive background of social locations, history, and parts of identity such as race and gender. Individualistic cultures put the needs of individuals over the needs of the group. In this type of culture, people are seen as independent and autonomous. A collectivist culture is based on valuing the needs of a group or a community over the individual's needs; therefore, there might be differences in people's experiences and challenges (Ariapooran et al., 2018).

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection delves into the psychological and cultural implications of encountering the taboo. It sheds light on how individuals construct their identities in relation to what is considered socially unacceptable (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 125–149). The minority stress model posits that racial, sexual, gender, and disability minorities face greater incidents of minority stress, leading to negative health outcomes and health disparities (McConnell et al., 2018). The Wheel of Power and Privilege is a theory based on the idea that power and privilege are not evenly distributed in society and that certain groups have more power and privilege than others. The wheel is divided into different categories, each representing a dimension of social identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, and

class (Andersen, 2022).

Queer identities have a long and varied history in India; Rao and Jacob (2012) talk about the complexities surrounding sexual orientation, behavior, and identity, emphasizing the shift from pathologizing homosexuality to recognizing it as a normal variant of human sexuality. The understanding of self-acceptance is crucial, and as studied by D'Augelli (1994), it talks about the psychological development of queer individuals and how self-acceptance could impact mental health and improve well-being. It also elaborates on the challenges faced by queer women as they confront internalized homophobia and social biases. More recent research focuses on varied identities, the intersectionality of gender, sexual orientation, and social background, and how these overlap in terms of self-acceptance or societal acceptance (Smith & Turell, 2017, pp. 637–657).

While self-acceptance meets the needs of self-validation, external acceptance or validation is often the next step that queer individuals consider. Coming out or revealing one's identity to others is an integral part of queer research (Cass, 1979, pp. 219–235) In seminal papers on the topic puts forth a theory that introduces the different stages of coming out, such as denial, identity comparison, identity pride and more. Recent studies continue along the same lines, focusing on ways of coming out in the digital age. Mowlabocus (2017) explores how digital spaces have redefined the experiences of queer women as they navigate their identities and self-disclosure, highlighting the significance of online communities like Reddit and Instagram that allow safe spaces in communities that do not have avenues of acceptance in physical spaces.

Winer and Bolzendahl (2021) study how the empowerment of queer individuals changes people's opinions over several years and how this can help the community as a whole. Pitts (2000) also talks about the intersectionality of individuals in asylum-seeking contexts, how they navigate their identities and mental health, and how their advocacy and activism can help claim rights and improve overall well-being.

This discrimination has a big impact on mental health as seen in studies like Chakrapani et al. (2017, pp. 217–226) found that transgender identity stigma and male sexuality-related stigma were significant predictors of depression in trans women and gay or bisexual men in India. Social support and resilient coping were identified as mediators in the relationship between stigma and depression, supporting the psychological mediation framework. However, these factors did not moderate the effect of stigma on depression. A larger view of the idea of mental health and queerness can be seen in the review article by Wandrekar and Nigudkar (2020, pp. 26–36), which provides a comprehensive overview of the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals in India based on research from 2009 to 2019. The authors found that LGBTQIA+ individuals in India have high rates of mental health concerns and that the adapted minority stress model may be a crucial pathway for these mental health issues.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that there is a substantial body of research focusing on male queerness, particularly in relation to their masculinity, internalized homophobia, and gender norms. There is a noticeable absence of similar studies that delve into the experiences, challenges, and identity formation of queer women. The existing literature predominantly emphasizes the experiences of gender and sexual identity among gay men, highlighting issues such as the conflict between heteronormative gender, the pressure to conform to masculine norms, and the discrimination faced by effeminate gay men within the LGBTQ+ community (Carpenter, 2021, pp. 478-484).

While current research underscores the urgent need for further research on the mental health and wellbeing of queer individuals in India, they also bring to light that there are no similar statistics about women in the country (Parwani & Talukdar, 2023). This shows us that we know little in terms of queer experiences that are woman-centric and how the lack of such information can prevent further research

on the same topic.

Method

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this study encompasses intersectionality, social location, and the intricacies of being non-WEIRD in non-Western contexts, all of which collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of cisgender queer women today. By illuminating these multifaceted aspects of identity and context, our research aims to bridge the existing knowledge gap and provide valuable insights into the lives and challenges of this population. Tice and Baumeister (1990) delve into the complexities of the human self, addressing its significance, the challenges it encounters, and its relationship with society. The theory talks about the idea of the self as not only a personal construct but also one that plays a central role in enabling both individuals and cultures to thrive. Tice and Baumeister's research provides a panoramic view of the human self, discussing the benefits of self-knowledge, the multiplicity of the self, and its connection to society. This study recognizes that the interaction of these facets creates a dynamic and interconnected network, with each element influencing and being influenced by the others.

Research Problem/Contexts

The focus of the paper lies in the concept of intersectionality, which is the interconnected nature of social categories in non-WEIRD contexts such as gender, sexuality, race, and class, which create complex and unique experiences for individuals (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Queer women in India face unique challenges due to societal expectations, patriarchal norms, and the invisibility of their experiences in popular culture and media. Further, queer women from minorities must navigate their sexuality in the context of other forms of discrimination, such as religious or caste-based prejudice (Davé, 2012).

Research Objectives

To explore the influence of society and cultural expectations on the identity formation and lived experiences of cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts.

To explore how cultural attitudes toward sexuality influence the self-acceptance and expression of cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts.

To investigate the intersection of race, class, and queer identity, how these dynamics influence the experience of cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts,

Sample

In this study, the sampling strategy used is a purposive sampling technique with a snowballing strategy (Frost, 2011). The population studied in this paper was 10 cisgender queer women (e.g., Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual, and other sexual orientations) between the ages of 18 and 40. This age range encompasses the transitional period from late adolescence to early adulthood, during which individuals typically experience significant personal, social, and developmental changes (Papalia et al., 1990; World Health

Organization: WHO, 2019). All participants are residents of India, English-speaking, cisgender queer women aged 18-29, with previous or present queer experiences and a score below 5 on the GHQ-28. Individuals with diagnosed medical conditions, those in the psychological morbidity category according to GHQ-28, and those identifying as transgender, undergoing reassignment surgery, or on hormonal medications were not considered participants.

Procedure

The research study followed a qualitative research paradigm to explore the complex intersectionality of identity among cisgender queer women in India. A purposive sampling technique was used to approach participants, their consent was taken, and the GHQ-28 was administered for screening. The semi-structured interview schedule was prepared by the primary researcher, and interviews were conducted. Data was audio-recorded for analysis. They were then thematically analyzed. The themes were then compared and coded to gain insight into the vast and diverse experiences of cisgender queer women.

Table 1. Sample questions from the semi-structured Interview guide in relation to the research objectives

Sl. No.	Sample Questions	Research Objective
		Explored
1.	<p>Please tell me how you feel about coming out.</p> <p>Who are you comfortable being open with if you are out, and how has that experience been for you?</p> <p>If not, can you elaborate on any challenges you have faced in this regard?</p>	<p>To look into the intersection of race, class, and queer identity, and how these dynamics influence the experience of cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts.</p>

Analysis of data

The interviews were audio recorded, a transcribed verbatim was created, and then the analytic method was applied. Following the interviews, a Braun and Clarke (2013) thematic analysis was conducted to extract and interpret the qualitative data effectively.

Each transcript was reviewed, compared and contrasted with the previous one to find if there were any negative cases and to identify cross-case comparisons.

Ethical Considerations

Participant identities are strictly confidential, pseudonyms are used, and participation is entirely voluntary, with the freedom to withdraw at any time. Participants are provided with clear consent forms, outlining study details and their rights. Data is gathered through physical paper forms and only used for research. The General Data Protection Regulation (2016) guidelines are followed to ensure participants' data security and privacy. Additionally, mental health resources are provided for support.

Results and Discussion

This study aimed to understand the nuanced experiences of cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts, focusing on the intersections of identity, cultural influences, self-acceptance, prejudice, and

social location. The research was grounded in the theoretical framework of intersectionality and employed qualitative methods to explore the interplay of social and cultural backgrounds in the context of sexuality.

The findings discuss the unique, in-depth experiences of cisgender queer women in diverse sociocultural environments and contribute to the broader understanding of intersectionality and fostering inclusivity and support for the community.

Ten participants were interviewed; they were cisgender queer women who ranged from 21-27 years old. The study, through interviews, found that the data could be classified into two broad global themes, namely, The Social influences on queerness and the Navigation of queer identities and discrimination. These themes provide a framework for understanding the experiences and challenges faced by queer individuals highlighting the importance of social and cultural factors in shaping their identities and experiences.

Global Theme 1: Social influences on queerness

Social influences on queerness refer to the various factors that shape and influence the way individuals and communities understand, express, and experience gender and sexuality. How an individual is perceived and, therefore, treated by the community around them can have an impact on their lives. These influences can be positive or negative, and they can come from various sources, including family, culture, religion, media, and the legal system. These influences can be both positive and negative and can shape

how queer individuals navigate their identities within various social contexts. The social influences on queerness identified through the interviews were support factors, privilege and social positioning and socio-cultural influences. Figure 2 represents the diagrammatic representation of this global theme. The sub-themes of support factors, privilege and social positioning, and socio-cultural influences are discussed below using appropriate examples from the data.

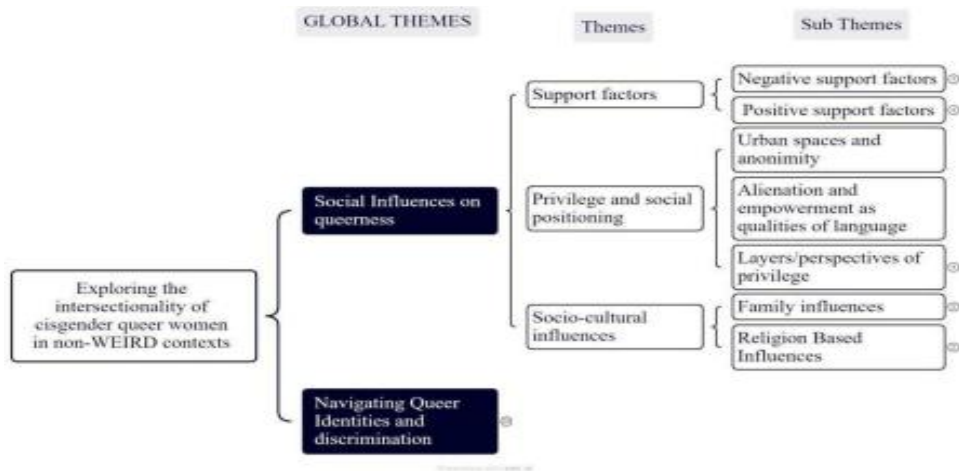


FIGURE 1: Elaborating on the first global theme

Showing the first global theme as social influences on queerness and the subsequent themes as support factors, privilege and social positioning and, sociocultural influences

Support Factors: In this study, participants focused on both positive and negative influences that shape the experiences of queer individuals. High levels of support often led to a sense of safety, security, and better coping mechanisms. In contrast, a lack of support or perceived prejudice was seen to result in

hiding identities and moving away from home.

Negative Support Factors: The negative support factors we encountered in interviews were ambiguity in boundaries, leading to confusion when coming out, self-esteem affected by lack of support, and delayed and inhibited romantic relationships in adolescence. As Bianca, a 24-year-old female from Mumbai, currently residing in Bangalore, puts it,

Firstly, society, the whole of society, is not really accepting of anybody who differs from the norm, right? Anybody who's abnormal in society is, quote-unquote, is like completely shunned. So, if you consider it like people from the community, in society's eyes, do come in the abnormal part of it. So yeah, I think coming out in this kind of place is like scary, man.

Here, she shares her fear of being shunned from society once she reveals her sexuality, implying that sexuality becomes a primary factor for social positioning. Being in a marginalized community, therefore, pulls one down the social ladder, more prone to stereotypes and prejudices. This experience is an example of one that I heard in most of the interviews I conducted, and it displays how negative support factors can impact one's sense of self and can create an ambiguity in boundaries regarding identity.

Positive Support Factors: We found clear boundaries about coming out, improved self-esteem, had better romantic relationships, and dealt with discrimination better. One of the major support factors was finding an open community where one fits in. As Vriddhi a 20-year-old female from North India who has settled in Bangalore, says about finding community,

Honestly, I feel like I go to pride events, I go to cry because I feel I feel like it's my community. I feel like I'm being with my people, which does not come off to me. You're like, it, there is a sense of expressing myself for other people as well. So that other people are more comfortable expressing themselves. That is also a very big part of it. But the most important part is, yeah, I've been with my community. And that sense of the sense of feeling like, yeah, I belong here. And this is this is, yeah, this is my, these are my people. And I will. That's more like why I go to pride events. Yeah. Yeah

This experience of finding a community and experiencing a sense of relief comes from spending much time not relating to the people around. This idea is reminiscent of Tripathi and Talwar's (2022, pp. 23–35) work on Community as a protective factor in a society where a lack of parental acceptance is often a challenge that queer people have to overcome, which creates a loss of community and therefore finding a safe space is a source of relief and support.

Urban Spaces and Anonymity: The city came up as a common theme in interviews where participants would move out of home or be planning to move out of home in order to avoid dealing with keeping their identity hidden or have to deal with the consequences of coming out to people they know. Sakshi, a 24-year-old female who recently moved to Bangalore from Chennai, talks about how she encountered this,

Because in my hometown, when I was hidden, I did fear. I mean, I did have to think multiple times before I expressed myself. And, there's this thing of, you know, in my hometown, I had to, like, dress a certain way. So, I don't, quote-unquote, look like look gay.

Once again, Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory comes into play here as sexual orientation is tied to social location. Dress and clothing are also a part of the experience shared by Sakshi as she tried not to "look gay." She talks about the lack of anonymity that a smaller town brings and the thought that goes beyond appearing heterosexual based on stereotypes of queer individuals. This ties into Hallam et.al's (2023) work on what gay stereotypes look like in terms of appearance and the discrimination that individuals can come across in medical and other spaces for looking queer or dressing a certain way.

Alienation and Empowerment as Qualities of Language: Language for some became a form of discrimination as a lot of native languages they were surrounded by, such as Kannada and Hindi, did not have the verbiage to describe queerness and different sexual orientations. The environment and community for each of these individuals impacted how they came to terms with language and their queerness.

Madhavi, a 22-year-old female from Bangalore, was already part of queer activism circles and therefore was able to join a collective that was working on including these words and terms in Indian languages. While she did feel like language was initially alienating, she was able to turn that into empowerment. This journey is seen through her stories about the queer community,

Yes. For example, I'm involved with the Kannada literature circle. And I don't know if you know, there is an initiative that started with Mara collective called queer poets collective...Padakosha, it's basically to add new terminologies of queer people into the Kannada dictionary.

Madhavi's experience with queerness was unique among interviews as it was a story of empowerment, whereas others often share how language becomes a hindrance. This focus on language and its impact on queerness is also highlighted in Kiesling's (2019) work on how linguistic patterns are influenced by social categories of gender and sexuality. Here, the idea of embodiment and the modification of language are also important to note.

We also looked at how different queer individuals defined privilege in different ways. In some interviews, the themes of pride and needing to be out to everyone prevailed, and in others, the idea of being left alone and being allowed to exist without having to deal with physical violence was defined as a privilege. Still, others talked about the legal and social levels of acceptance as a privilege.

Sakshi, a 24-year-old female who recently moved to Bangalore from Chennai, talks about identifying as cisgender.

Again, that's a very big privilege, I have felt very secure with being cis-gendered. And I've never thought about it. I have thought about it, but it's never been much of a problem. I do dress a bit more feminine. But it was a problem when I started telling my parents that I wanted to dress more unisexually.

This idea of not being discriminated against as a privilege was a common theme that was observed throughout the interviews. It also ties into Carpenter's (2021, pp. 478-484) ideas of how the level of discrimination varies based on whether someone identifies as cis-gender or transgender, it is observed that in terms of things like medical care, there is greater discrimination of transgender folk when compared to cisgender individuals. This brings in the theme of a hierarchy in discrimination where there seems to be levels of discrimination based on specific sexual and gender orientation.

Upbringing and cultural influences, mainly related to family and religion, were also large contributors to the lives of queer individuals; in terms of family- parental and extended family influences and attitudes often created fear of coming out or of being ostracised, and in terms of religion. The person's spirituality and what they were taught as part of their religion were the biggest influences on their queer identities and perception of themselves as queer.

Family influences: The data showed that the familial influences were largely from people's immediate family, such as parents. However, there are a few instances where relatives or extended family also impacted individuals. Sakshi, a 24-year-old female who recently moved to Bangalore from Chennai, talks about not being able to come out at home due to familial attitudes that do not accept queer individuals,

But I know the intensity of the emotion, the amount of the betrayal, the grief, the sadness of not being quoted, unquoted, normal, and not being something that society wants me to be. I

could never be that, you know, like an irreplaceable sort of loss, that you feel that you're like, I can never be myself in my home. And that is a lot. And I still see that loss of why can't I just be at home? Like, why can't I do the things I want to do at home? Why can't I be who I am in my own home? And that is what forced me to seek opportunities outside of the home.

She talks about not being able to be herself in her own home as a loss and how the feeling of not being normal, according to the people around, creates a sense of sadness and grief. She also questions why she has to face this discrimination in spaces where she is supposed to feel safe, like her home. This experience is like what is explored in Rao's (2014) work on queerness and the Family Form and how an intersectional approach is beneficial to understanding how family dynamics and attitudes impact individuals. There are many nuances in this experience, and there is a lot of questioning and anger felt about the lack of acceptance. However, there is also a sense of loss and grief at not being able to be herself in her home.

Both individual spirituality or beliefs and taught religion are seen to influence queer individuals. Rashi, a 27-year-old female who moved to Bangalore from Mumbai for work, talks about her experiences with religion and queerness in different parts of India,

I've realized religion does play a big role, like, at least I mean, this is the first living in North India experience that I had when I started my masters. And even in Mumbai, I lived there for three months in the city that I had. So yeah, I feel like, for some reason, or maybe I'm just generalizing on my very limited experience. But in my experience, I felt like Hindus, especially, were way more narrow-minded in North India. So, I just chose not to. I think religion plays a big role for somebody, especially in North India.

Rashi talks about the intersectionality between social location and religion. She speaks about her experience with religion and queerness, and her opinions are limited to the Hindu community as she is Hindu. Her views on how religion and social location interact are reinforced by Crenshaw's (2013, pp. 93–118) work on the margins of intersectionality with influences of Bowleg's (2008, pp. 1125–1130) work on the involvement of geographical location and other dimensions of identity as here, the participant feels that there is a religious influence when it comes to queerness but she also specifies that the influence varies based on what part of the country you are in and what a particular religion believes in that part of the country, which is an intersection of social location and religion and of queerness with both of them.

The next global theme identified was about navigating queer identities through discrimination, this theme looked at how queer individuals perceive and experience discrimination and prejudice. Understanding how individuals may feel discriminated against, whether perceived or actual, can help us understand the kinds of discrimination and its impact better. We can also tell us about this discrimination's impacts on individuals. Figure 2 represents the diagrammatic representation of this global theme. The sub-themes of the need for acceptance, perceived notions of discrimination and experiences of actual discrimination are discussed below using appropriate examples from the data.

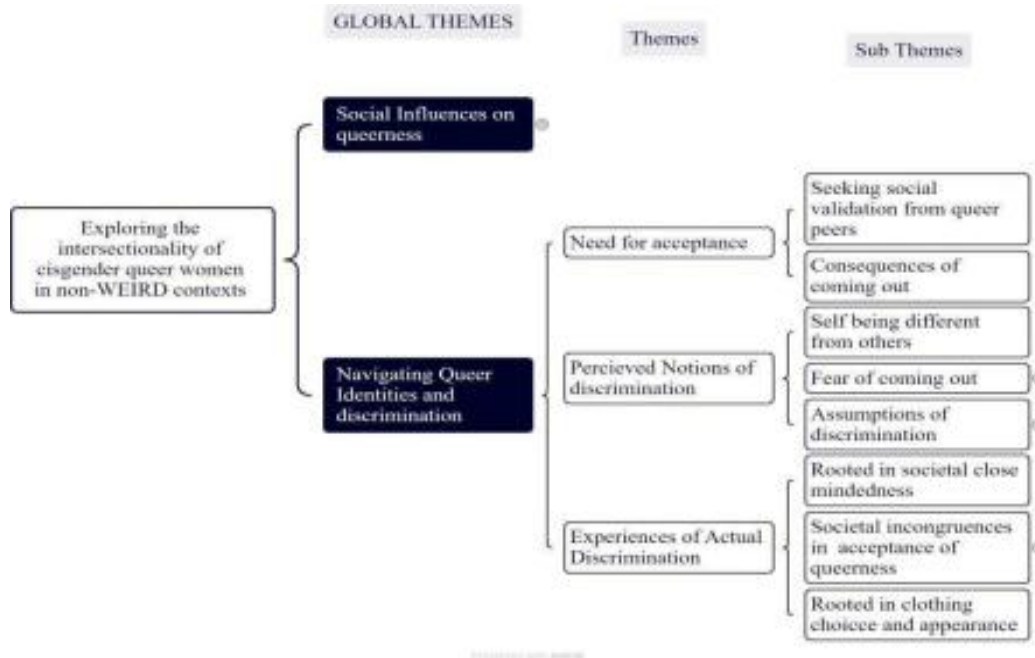


FIGURE 2: Elaborating on the second global theme

Showing the second global theme of Navigating queer identities and discrimination, and the subsequent themes and sub-themes, such as the need for acceptance, perceived notions of discrimination, and experiences of discrimination.

While this may not initially seem like navigating through discrimination, what we noticed in interviews was that in order to feel justified in their sexual orientation, individuals would often need other people to tell them it is okay. This is a discrimination of a kind, as the norm of being straight is so deep-rooted that individuals have to seek reassurance that it is okay not to be straight.

The same sentiments are reflected in what Rashi a 27-year-old female who moved from Mumbai to Bangalore for work, says,

For me, the main reason was just finding a community. That was my main reason because it was so difficult to find people who were just normal about it and not even question me one thing, like if I stated something, leave it at that. So, it was way easier to find easier conversations and just normal. Very nice. Acceptance. So that was selfish, but mostly my reason to find more people in the community.

Here she is talking about how the reason she reaches out to groups online, goes to pride events or engages in online activism is to find like-minded people and to be accepted and validated for being queer without having to answer questions or explain everything about her identity. While she feels that this may not be the right reason for spreading awareness about queer acceptance, it is what has worked for her.

Consequences of Coming Out: Queer individuals often assess how people may react to them coming out. If they feel unsafe or like there will be a bad reaction, they do not come out. Therefore, consequences of coming out, like being ostracized, are important considerations for queer people. Stories like, "So even you know, doing this interview is scary for me too, because there is still that fear that you know, somewhere if this gets out and someone maybe recognizes I know this completely anonymous, but even if someone recognizes, you know, like with my voice and it is out there, then it might just be extremely messy for me" from Aabha, a 21-year-old female who was brought up in

Bangalore and recently moved to Delhi reflects a point of view where safety and maintaining the norm is the priority for them at the moment. She talks about how there is a sense of fear that people who do not accept queer identities will find out about her, and there will be consequences; though she does not mention the kinds of consequences, she alludes to them being negative and messy. The outcome of people finding out about one's queerness could range from discrimination to ostracism and, in some cases, physical violence. Pachankis and Bränström's (2019) work discusses the impact of living in the closet and the mental health challenges consistent with living in places that do not accept your identity. Here, this manifests in worrying about the consequences of revealing said identity.

Perceived Notions of Discrimination: Perceived discrimination refers to things that may not be intended as discrimination, but that may come across to queer individuals as discrimination. This can be feeling like they are different from anyone and not accepted by anyone; this can also be rooted in past experiences and noting abjection about similar topics in the past.

The interviews showed that queer people can feel alone when they first come to realize their sexuality, and they see themselves as different from everyone around them or anything that they have seen in the past. This leads to feelings like, "My fear, also somewhere deep down, is what would my parents have to go through if, because of what society will put on them, because they aren't able to understand? Yeah" as expressed by Aabha, a 21-year-old female who was brought up in Bangalore and recently moved to Delhi, in her interview. The participant is expressing fear that her parents might be discriminated against by society for her queerness even though they may not be fully aware of or understand the concept of queerness completely. This experience is one of feeling guilty for her parents having to navigate through her identity and deal with the idea of her being different from everyone else in society. Tice and Baumeister's (1990) work on the complexity of the self and their interaction with society is relevant here as the participant was concerned about how her family might be discriminated against by other people and was therefore protective of the family even though she has mentioned a sense of distance from her family.

Fear of Coming Out: One major example of this is the fear of coming out. Perceptions of discrimination can be rooted in not receiving the social acceptance needed or in needing validation from parents and family. It can also be rooted in power dynamics in a society where a woman is already once removed from power due to gender, and the addition of queer identity to this makes her twice removed from power.

Sahar, a 25-year-old female from West Bengal who recently settled in Bangalore, talks about how there are risks to coming out in Indian society,

But common people like me, it's easy for us to get attacked. Right? So my identity will always have to be live behind the curtains and only be available and present to just a few people whom I know I can trust. And I also feel like this scenario will take a bit of time to change. It's going to be difficult because we're very deeply rooted in our culture. And, you know, the kind of multicultural thing that we have. So, yeah.

The feeling of fear of violence and being publicly out as queer in a society that does not accept one's identity was common through the interviews and is a testament to the way queer people are perceived by society. Past experiences of other queer individuals are the reason behind this fear. She also mentions the deep-rooted culture as a challenge towards coming out. Singh and Durso's (2017) work on the importance of understanding how discrimination and stigma might impact the well-being of queer individuals and shape their identities may be relevant here as the participant's identity here is continuing to remain hidden due to experiences and perceptions of discrimination.

Assumptions of Discrimination: The interviews also showed a theme of stories from several participants

wherein there was a feeling of overall discrimination in an environment or from a person or situation, but there was no tangential experience of discrimination. For example, several participants reported feeling that there is a hierarchy within the queer community where gay men come first, followed by lesbian women, and bisexual, pansexual, and all other orientations come further down in the hierarchy. Vriddhi, a 20-year-old female from North India who has settled in Bangalore, talks about this hierarchy,

I feel I also feel like if I was a gay man, it would have been different because there will be more difficulties, maybe more, trying to accept trying to get people to accept I don't know where that comes from

The participant felt like there is a hierarchy or different levels of discrimination that are based on gender and sexual orientation, where her status as a woman already makes her once removed from power structures. The fact that she identifies as queer makes her further removed from power. This is reminiscent of the theory of the wheel of power (Andersen, 2022), where the main idea is that some groups in society have greater access to power and privilege than others, here as well women. Specifically those who are queer, have a lot less access to power and privilege.

Similarly, participants picked up on other's fears of queer people. Due to stereotypes or past experiences, people tend to feel that queer individuals are dangerous or mentally ill. Vicarious experiences also contribute to this as the discrimination was not directed at them, but the individual's attitude was clear. An example of this is Bianca, a 24-year-old female from Mumbai, currently residing in Bangalore, and her story about her uncle,

My uncle is gay. He left in the uh when he was in his early 20s,.. And like growing up, it's we've always joked and laughed about it. And like, I have always felt uncomfortable in those situations because I don't feel like it's right

Here, the participant is talking about a vicarious experience of discrimination that she felt through her uncle, which helped her assess potential reactions to her queerness. This is perhaps why she felt uncomfortable in those situations and questioned whether it was right. Rao's (2014) work on the family form and queerness seems to be relevant here as the family created this space of discomfort and discrimination for the participant even though it was not directed towards her. This discrimination stayed with the participant and eventually made her distance herself from them as she did not feel comfortable enough to come out to them.

Experiences of Actual Discrimination: Perhaps the most challenging part of navigating queer identities is dealing with experiences of actual discrimination. There are different sources and ways in which this happens; however, the basic premise is that the individual is treated differently or mistreated due to their queer identity.

Rooted in Societal Close-mindedness: According to participant interviews, the information about queer individuals in society is often based on stereotypes. They are seen as different from the norm, and therefore, their queerness is seen as wrong or as a problem that is to be fixed.

Sakshi, a 24-year-old female who recently moved to Bangalore, talks about her parents not accepting her sexual orientation,

And she had the worst reaction to that and she just sort of shut it down immediately. And I told her like, I don't want you to tell anyone else I definitely don't want you to tell me that. She did. She like five minutes later, she told my dad she didn't even think about it for a second. And so that really ruined my relationship with her. I completely lost trust in her. This experience of coming out to people close to the self and being immediately shut down or discriminated against is a reason for a lot of queer people to fear coming out.

Sakshi's experience displayed the kind of loss and change that coming out can bring; She mentions how her mother was almost ashamed of the identity that she had shared and how she proceeded to tell the father, causing greater discrimination for the participant. Both Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection and the Minority Stress model are important here. Abjection or shock and horror followed by shunning is seen here as the participant reveals her identity as something away from the norm. In terms of the minority stress model, the added stress of fearing her parents' reaction and having to deal with the consequences of coming out is something she only has to face because she is a minority in terms of sexual orientation.

Incongruences in Acceptance of Queerness: Often, there is acceptance to a certain degree but not complete acceptance, individuals may not understand the concept of bisexuality, for example, or they may be okay with queer men but not queer women. Kriti, a 24-year-old female who is new to Bangalore, talks about what happened after coming out to a close friend,

Okay, I trusted you because I have known you for so long. And what do you mean by Oh, as long as you do not like me? It's all right. And I do not have any problem with you, but just don't develop a crush on me.

Here the participant talks about how her queerness was conditionally accepted by people, in the sense that her friends were okay with her being queer but added in the stereotype that queer individuals tend to like everyone. The participant feels a sense of betrayal as she feels like people whom she had trusted for so long have let her down by being prejudiced toward her identity and experiences. Andersen's (2022) work on the Wheel of Power and Privilege has an interesting application here, as Kriti's experience is an example of how the people who are further away from power and privilege are almost distanced from those closer to power. Here, the participant's friend distances herself from the participant and the queer identity by saying that she accepts Kriti's identity as long as it has nothing to do with her.

Rooted in Clothing Choice and Appearance: Queer women talked about how they were judged based on the way they dressed; some examples were of people being judged for dressing androgynous or getting their hair cut short, and other examples were getting judged for not dressing according to queer stereotypes. Rashi, a 27-year-old female who moved to Bangalore for work, talks about how she gets judged for her dress,

Yeah, they expect you... is... they expect you to present yourself in some way so that you perfectly fit into that category. And then people will be shocked if you do not fit in because apparently, you have to be dressed flamboyantly and kind of, I don't know, tell everybody everywhere.

The participant here talks about how there is a certain stereotype about how queer people tend to dress and express themselves and how she feels an expectation to dress and present herself according to those stereotypes; she may also be feeling pressure to come out, which is indirectly coming through in terms of dress and appearance. Camp et al.'s (2020, pp. 2353–2373) work on self-acceptance and its role in facing prejudice is relevant here as in this case, the participant has a level of self-acceptance that allows her to be confident in her dressing style and she is, therefore, able to confront the expectation of dressing a certain way and deal with it.

Ananya, a 25-year-old student in Bangalore talks about not wanting to change herself because of stereotypes,

I stay away from them. So, I really feel there is no interference in the lifestyle, and I like it; there is no such thing that I don't go through, like guilt or shame for the way I am, because they never will. I just visit them once in a while, you're on vacation, etc., so yeah, I do that. I'm not dismissing them, but yeah. They will comment on my clothes and hair and all and why I should dress differently for them, ya, come on.

This experience of feeling judged by society for dressing or presenting oneself differently from what is expected of someone of a particular gender is a form of stereotyping and prejudice that is based on the feeling of anyone different being bad or posing some form of danger. In this specific instance, the participant dresses more androgynous and has short hair. Therefore, the comments on dress and appearance also have a gendered aspect. Rao's (2014, pp. 199–217) work on intersectionality, specifically on how gender and sexuality can intersect in the face of discrimination, is pertinent here as the participant talks about how she feels this pressure to dress more feminine and therefore less queer in her hometown and eventually decides against it.

Summary and Conclusion

The study was conducted on 10 young women with a mean age of 23 in the urban context of India. Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 120–123) were used for a thematic analysis of their personal interviews, which revealed the intricate interplay of social, cultural, and personal factors in shaping their identities and experiences. The research delved into the multifaceted nature of queerness, highlighting the significance of social influences, privilege, language, family upbringing, religion, discrimination, and the quest for acceptance. The study underscored the complexities and challenges faced by this community, shedding light on the diverse ways in which societal norms, cultural backgrounds, and personal interactions impacted their sense of self and well-being.

The study reveals that anonymity, particularly in urban spaces, plays a crucial role in aiding individuals in adjusting to their sexuality. Participants who moved to larger cities experienced a sense of freedom and safety in expressing their identities without fear of judgment or discrimination.

We also found that vicarious experiences help queer folk assess other people's mindset. Queer individuals often observed the people close to them reacting to other queer folk or queer news negatively, the most common experiences were of stereotyping and of being prejudiced towards them, and therefore, this meant that participants kept their sexual orientation hidden and did not feel safe having open conversations about their identities.

Queer individuals mentioned that they felt like there was a hierarchy within the community where gay men were on top of the hierarchy, followed by lesbian women and individuals who are attracted to more than one gender, and trans people are lower on the hierarchy. This feeling, although perceived, was a common theme among several participants.

Through participants' interviews, they talked about their experiences with discrimination that had varied causes. These causes were rooted in many things, such as societal close-mindedness, incongruences in acceptance, conditional acceptance, and a lack of awareness leading to discrimination. Queer individuals, therefore react to and deal with different kinds of discrimination in varied ways. Language was one of the aspects influencing the acceptance and empowerment of queer identities. Participants shared experiences where native languages lacked terminology to describe queerness, leading to feelings of alienation. However, some individuals found empowerment through initiatives that aimed to include queer terms in local languages.

The study suggests that clothing choices can impact how queer individuals are perceived and treated within their communities. Participants shared experiences where conforming to societal norms in appearance was a strategy to avoid discrimination or maintain anonymity, especially in environments where queerness is stigmatized. Positive support factors, such as finding accepting communities and supportive friends, were crucial in fostering self-acceptance and resilience among queer individuals.

Participants shared experiences where their identities were misunderstood or seen as problematic,

leading to feelings of alienation and mistrust, especially within family dynamics. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of intersectionality, self-acceptance, and the challenges faced by cisgender queer women in diverse sociocultural environments.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations, including the self-selected sample, which may not be representative of the entire population of cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. The study is limited to cisgender queer women, excluding other gender identities and sexual orientations, which could limit the understanding of intersectionality in non-WEIRD contexts among other genders.

Future research could continue to explore the intersectionality of cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts, focusing on the intersections of identity, cultural influences, self-acceptance, prejudice, and social location. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term course of cisgender queer women's experiences and the impact of cultural context on their identity formation. Additionally, comparative studies across different non-WEIRD contexts could highlight the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by cisgender queer women in various sociocultural environments. More quantitative studies with cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts can help add to the literature. They can add to the understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by cisgender queer women in non-WEIRD contexts, which are often underrepresented in existing research. Lastly, research should continue to explore the role of intersectionality in shaping the experiences of other marginalized populations, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Ethical considerations

The study proposal was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, Department of Psychology, St. Joseph's University. Before enrolment in the study, all participants were provided with written informed consent. This research was conducted following the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association, 2002.

Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author, AC. However, the data are not publicly available because the interviews contain information that may compromise the privacy of research participants.

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Appendices

Appendix A

List of Study Participants

10 participants were involved in the study:

- **Bianca**, 24, Mumbai, residing in Bangalore
- **Vridhhi**, 20, North India, residing in Bangalore
- **Sakshi**, 24, recently moved to Bangalore
- **Madhavi**, 22, Bangalore
- **Rashi**, 27, moved to Bangalore for work
- **Aabha**, 21, Bangalore
- **Sahar**, 25, West Bengal, settled in Bangalore
- **Kriti**, 24, new to Bangalore
- **Ananya**, 25, Bangalore
- **Anna**, 23, From Chennai to Bangalore

Appendix B

Themes:

Sub Theme	Thematic category- 3-5 main themes
Coming out needing a sense of trust, boundaries that are flexible in terms of coming out to different people and the levels of coming out based on levels of trust (eg. i told them, they may have heard, they guessed etc.) - MD/AB	Impact of social factors
Having support within the community being able to hear experiences etc being a supportive factor, giving people acceptance and safety- AB/SS/RB/VR/MD	- negative impact
the city being a place of anonymity creating safety for queer people, no one knows them and therefore less discrimination- MD/SS/RB	-positive impact

relationship between queerness and privilege - how the definition of privilege changes- not being discriminated against is a privilegeMD/VR/RB	Interplay of privilege in social positioning
language and queerness- languages like tamil and kannada don't have a term or a word for queerness and anything related to queerness- can be alienating, changing that can also lead to empowerment - MD/	Intersectionality between background, culture and queerness
upbringing and social background impacting the way queerness is viewed and having to consider this while coming out- AB/SS/RB/VR/MD	fear of social ostracism
religious beliefs playing a role in terms of how people view queerness, can perpetuate stereotypes and is the reason people don't feel comfortable coming out- AB/SS/RB	Discrimination
fear of not being queer enough- pressure from self and others to look a certain way and dress like a male - VR/RB/MD	- perceived experiences
Fear of the consequences of coming out- lack of acceptance ostracism- AB/SS/RB/VR/MD	-real experiences
feeling different from others, being outcast /(social isolation from the rest of the people around you) -AB/SS/RB/VR	
Hierarchy within the community- being queer and a women or being bisexual less than being a gay man and being lesbian etc MD/AB/SS/VR	
fear of coming out or talking to new people because of discrimination, lack of awareness etc	
fear of queer people- due to stereotypes or past experiences, feeling like they are dangerous or mentally ill - MD/AB/RB	
facing a great deal of discrimination from people outside the community (impact on self-acceptance, leading to alienation and fear) -AB/SS/RB/VR	
Facing a sense of discrimination from within the community (pressure to adopt a label, forced to be queer in a certain way) - AB/SS/RB/VR/MD	

Lack of awareness in community around queerness being a barrier to acceptance and safety - AB/SS/MD	
stereotypes like dressing a certain way (more manly) or being open to open relationships because they are bisexual - AB/MD/SS/RB/VR	
new themes - 6/7/8	
lack of outside acceptance leading to delay in self acceptance	
delayed relationships and romance, milestones of relationships because of queerness	
conflict between spirituality and religion and her queer identity self	
experiences of other queer people showing how she might be treated	
stereotypes that queer women have a crush on every other woman	
feeling like injustice is being done but cannot do anything about it	
conditional acceptance- as long as not my kids, as long as you dont like me etc	

Theme map:

Appendix C

Links for further data

- Interview Analysis:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1rf23p-ejMVcsfp3BFhMh0LCAqKYjzJfA_SeHa9E9fM4/edit?usp=sharing
- Transcripts:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1HvJKfgkRHxQ3CINvXw8simgpC0DUqC1j?usp=drive_link
- Recordings:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1sfCGvtn7njCP-gL5LLkHY3JughfAQph6?usp=drive_link