



The Disclosure Dilemma: The dilemma regarding queer identity disclosure among LGBP College Students

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the dilemma experienced by college students regarding queer identity disclosure in their academic institutions. Ten participants aged 19-22 identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Pansexual pursuing higher education were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis helped identify four themes: The Filtering Process, Factors Encouraging Disclosure, Factors Encouraging Concealment, and The Impact of Dilemma. The results of this study highlight the role of faculty members and the college environment, giving us insight into how we can make academic spheres more inclusive to queer students.

Keywords: *Queer Identity Disclosure, Coming out, Queer Identity Disclosure in Academic Institution, Disclosure Dilemma, Disclosure Decision-Making*

Introduction

While homosexuality is no longer criminalized in India, most queer individuals still fear judgement on disclosure (Joshi et al., 2022). Since our society remains predominantly a heteronormative one, if one wants to make their queer identity known, they must ‘come out,’ often an important part of queer identity development, acting as a stepping stone to increase the possible integration of their public and private identities, establishing networks of social support (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981-82; D’Augelli, 1994; Grace, 1992, as cited in Ranade, 2018; Pandya et al., 2013; Troiden, 1989; Waagen, 2022).

Unlike many stigmatized social identities, queer identities are relatively concealable. While this may seem beneficial, concealing information requires a huge amount of monitoring and vigilance about possible risks, making it cognitively taxing (Suppes et al., 2011). Due to this, disclosing one’s queer identity can cause a considerable amount of dilemma. In this paper, ‘disclosure dilemma’ refers to the dilemma regarding queer identity disclosure, and can be best understood as a multilayered decision-making process involving strategy formation, perception of risk, and fear of discrimination while deciding whether to disclose or conceal queer identity along with ways to do the same (Banik et al., 2019; Maji et al., 2023).

Disclosure helps queer individuals express themselves more freely, find social support, and increase social information available during social interactions, benefitting physical and mental health (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2011). Therefore, it is important to understand the factors influencing the disclosure dilemma. While there have been studies exploring the disclosure dilemma in Indian workplace settings, there is a lack of studies exploring this dilemma in academic settings.

Method

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of LGBP college students navigating the dilemma regarding queer identity disclosure in Indian academic settings.

Research Question

How do LGBP college students experience the dilemma regarding queer identity disclosure in their academic institutions?

Research Design

Phenomenological research design was used to understand the experience of the phenomenon of the disclosure dilemma in academic settings.

Sampling

The study population comprised students pursuing their undergraduate or postgraduate studies, who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Pansexual. The sample consisted of 10 participants belonging to the middle-class socio-economic background. The participants' demographic details are represented in Table 1. Sampling was done using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Indian citizenship.
- Identification as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Pansexual.
- Enrolment in an offline higher education program in India.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Breakdown

	Number	Percentage
Gender Identity		
Cisgender Man	4	40
Cisgender Woman	3	30
Non-binary	3	30
Genderfluid	2	67
Transmasculine	1	33
Sexual Identity		
Lesbian	2	20
Gay	2	20
Bisexual	3	30
Pansexual	3	30
Age		
19	2	20
20	1	10
21	2	20
22	5	50
Religion		
Buddhist	1	10
Christian	3	30

Hindu	3	30
Hindu & Buddhist	1	10
Irreligion	2	20
City of Residence		
Bengaluru	3	30
Manipal	1	10
Mumbai	1	10
Pune	2	20
Thane	2	20
Vadodara	1	10
Ongoing Course		
Graduate	6	60
Postgraduate	4	40

Data Collection and Storage

Data was collected in January and February of 2024. Informed consent was obtained, demographic details were collected using a form, and participants were asked to pick a pseudonym, which was used to identify them for the rest of the process to ensure confidentiality. Data was collected through one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted either offline, online via ZOOM, or telephonically, predominantly in English. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. A backup of all the data collected was maintained using a restricted Google Drive folder.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using the Braun & Clarke model of Thematic Analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The following precautions were used to protect the rights of the participants:

1. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation in writing.
2. In writing, the participants were informed about the data collection methods and the provisions made to protect data and ensure confidentiality.
3. Informed consent was obtained.
4. Transcripts were sent to the participants for review before analysis.

Result and Discussion

With the help of thematic analysis, four themes were identified. Table 2 represents the social identity profiles of the participants.

Table 2

Participants' Social Identity Profile

	Age	Sexual Identity	Gender Identity	Course
P1	19	Lesbian	Woman	BSc (Liberal Arts) Honors
P2	21	Lesbian	Woman	BA (Liberal Arts) Honors
P3	22	Gay	Man	BA in Multimedia and Mass Communication
P4	19	Gay	Man	BCA
P5	22	Bisexual	Woman	MSc Clinical psychology
P6	20	Bisexual	Non-binary	BBA
P7	22	Bisexual	Man	MSc Psychology (Specialization: Industrial)
P8	22	Pansexual	Non-binary	MA European Literature and Culture
P9	22	Pansexual	Man	MSc Forensic Science (Specialization: Criminology)
P10	21	Pansexual	Non-binary	BA in Multimedia and Mass Communication

Note. P = Participant; BSc = Bachelor of Science; BA = Bachelor of Arts; BCA= Bachelor of Computer Applications; MSc = Master of Science; BBA = Bachelor of Business Administration; MA = Master of Arts.

1. The Filtering Process

1.1. Observing Attributes

Guided by their past experiences, participants observed a variety of attributes during interactions including political alignment, cultural and educational background, open-mindedness, media consumed, curiosity, politeness, religious beliefs, affiliation with other queer people, as well as their 'vibe,' in line with previous studies (Bowling et al., 2016; Banik et al., 2019; Evans & Broido, 1999; Mansh et al., 2015; Sahoo et al., 2023; Stevens, 2004).

This process was distinctly described by some to be their “metric,” “filter,” “mental checklist,” or process of “screening the people.”

1.2. Gauging Queerphobia

In line with previous findings (Evans & Broido, 1999), the extent of queerphobia was also gauged, usually by introducing a queer-related topic to the interaction and observing reactions, for example, making references to queer culture, making a comment about the queer community, initiating conversation about a queer celebrity or influencer, making ironic queerphobic jokes, and indirect disclosure hinting at queer identity. Engagement in and reactions to queerphobic humour were also observed, in line with previous findings (Mansh et al., 2015).

2. Factors Encouraging Disclosure

2.1. Social Support

In line with previous studies (Biswas et al., 2022; Bowling et al., 2016; Evans & Broido, 1999), disclosure helped strengthen relationships and in building social support networks. Support from peers and friends regarding disclosure also helped participants feel assured about not being alone in facing possible negative consequences, in line with previous findings (Stevens, 2004).

2.2. Disclosure by Other Queer People

In line with previous studies (Garvey et al., 2018; Stevens, 2004), witnessing disclosure by other queer people, including peers and faculty, also helped some participants gather the courage to disclose, mostly when well-received.

2.3. Perceived Necessity

In line with previous findings (Mansh et al., 2015), necessity of disclosure was also taken into consideration, including the nature of the course, subject being discussed, and having a significant identity-related contribution to the class discussion. Moreover, most preferred disclosure over concealment on being asked, especially in the case of a non-binary participant to prevent misgendering and deadnaming, in line with previous findings (Waagen, 2022).

2.4. Inclusive Attitude of Faculty

The faculty's inclusivity was gauged through inclusivity conveyed in language, steps taken to prevent misgendering and deadnaming, discussions encouraged in class, response to disclosure by queer students, and political and religious beliefs expressed in class, in line with previous studies (Furrow, 2012; Mansh et al., 2015; Mehra & Braquet, 2007; Stevens, 2004). Treating queer identities nonchalantly like cis-heterosexual identities was also perceived to be

inclusive, contrary to a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ environment as noted in previous research (Evans & Broido, 1999).

2.5. Perceived Support of College Authorities and College Environment

In line with previous studies (Evans & Broido, 1999; Mansh et al., 2015; Mehra & Braquet, 2007), participants felt more secure to disclose when they perceived the college environment to be inclusive and anticipated discriminatory actions to be reprimanded. Intentional hiring of queer-friendly faculty and staff members also helped, echoing previous findings (Stevens, 2004).

2.6. Authentic Expression

In line with previous studies (Coleman, 1981-82; Evans & Broido, 1999), authentic expression was found to be a major motive, along with avoiding feeling reserved or suffocated around people, especially friends. Some also expressed wanting to disclose to be true to themselves, even if it lacked necessity. Moreover, six were firm on being authentic about their queer identity on Instagram, describing it as a liberating experience and an outlet for expression. These findings are in line with previous research (Rhoads, 1995).

2.7. Normalization through Exposure

Some also disclosed to normalize queer identities and raise awareness, in line with previous findings (Evans & Broido, 1999). Two also spoke about being open about their queer identity on Instagram for the same reason.

2.8. Higher Engagement in Academics

Two participants expressed how being able to be open about their identity in class enhanced their performance in class, in line with previous findings (Garvey et al., 2018). One also mentioned how disclosure helped them take more interest in class, improve their grades, and avoid absenteeism, tying in with previous findings (Chakrapani et al., 2021).

3. Factors Encouraging Concealment

3.1. Apprehension Regarding Queer Identity Being Used Against Them

Use of their queer identity against them meant different things to different participants. One expressed how their religious/spiritual opinion was invalidated by a classmate by bringing up their queer identity. Most others feared being outed to other peers or their parents, tying in with previous findings (Stevens, 2004).

3.2. Stigma

In line with previous studies (Chakrapani et al., 2021; Evans & Broido, 1999; Mansh et al., 2015; Stevens, 2004), stigma and anticipation of stigma, including rejection, exclusion, and hatred, acted as another motive.

3.3. Fear of Academic/Career Discrimination

In line with previous studies (Mehra & Braquet, 2007; Stevens, 2004), one participant narrated how their fear of academic/career discrimination increased since they witnessed a faculty member having to leave their position allegedly due to being queer. One also expressed choosing to fit in to avoid the impact of possible exclusion on academics, in line with previous studies (Bowling et al., 2017; Evans & Broido, 1999; Mansh et al., 2015). Moreover, most LinkedIn users shared they weren't open about their queer identity on there due to apprehension of being denied employment.

3.4. Fear of Physical Aggression

Fear of physical altercation, as mentioned by three of five students staying away from their families also discouraged disclosure, acting as an extension to previous findings (Rhoads, 1995).

3.5. The Downside to Disclosure

Some disadvantages experienced by participants post-disclosure included being reduced to their sexual identity, i.e., being “the gay best friend,” and sexualization of a bisexual woman participant by straight women. Some participants also noted being avoided, or being blocked on Instagram by peers post-disclosure in line with previous findings (Evans & Broido, 1999). Walking on eggshells around participants, presumably to avoid ‘saying the wrong thing’ was also observed. Lastly, some participants experienced microaggressions and queerphobia to varying degrees from peers and faculty, both offline as well as on the class WhatsApp group chat.

4. The Impact of Dilemma

4.1. Detrimental

Seven out of the eight participants who admitted to experiencing the disclosure dilemma expressed it had a detrimental impact on them. In line with previous studies (Rostosky et al., 2022; Tomori et al., 2016), three mentioned how ‘the filtering process’ during interactions brought about anxiety and hypervigilance. In line with previous studies (Achar & Gopal, 2021; Evans & Broido, 1999), some also mentioned how it was mentally draining to conceal their queer identity during interactions, especially by modifying their behaviour. One mentioned that while they experience the dilemma, they do not experience detrimental effects from it since they're firm about non-disclosure.

4.2. Protective

The disclosure dilemma also had a protective impact by preventing disclosure to unsafe individuals, which may have consequences worse than those caused by the disclosure dilemma, echoing previous studies (Evans & Broida, 1999; Stevens, 2004). Around seven participants mentioned not having many negative experiences due to precautions taken.

4.3. Inexperience of the Dilemma

Notably, two participants expressed unfamiliarity with the experience of the disclosure dilemma in their academic institution. They attributed this to the supportive and accepting nature of their department or academic institution making them feel secure, similar to previous findings (Stevens, 2004).

Conclusion

This study exploring the experiences of LGBP college students revealed four themes helping us understand ‘the filtering process,’ some factors encouraging disclosure and concealment, and the impact of the experience of the disclosure dilemma.

The importance of cultivating a queer-friendly college environment in helping authentic expression by queer students and improved engagement in academics is made evident through the results. The need for raising awareness to aid students as well as the faculty be more queer-friendly is also highlighted, which will help normalize queer identities, reduce stigma, and make disclosure easier for queer students. The importance of ensuring protection against discrimination and taking steps to prevent misgendering and deadnaming is also recognized.

Some limitations of the study include the lack of binary transgender participants and insight into the experiences of queer students belonging to lower and upper socioeconomic backgrounds, selection of participants from only six Indian cities, and data analysis being done by one researcher. Future research can focus on queer individuals belonging to demographics not included in this study. Further, action research must be conducted to identify culture-specific measures that can be taken by academic institutions to improve the academic experience as well as the quality of life of their queer students.

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