

Silenced at Home, Visible Online: A Digital Narrative Study of How LGBTQ+ Young Adults Negotiate Family Belonging, Cultural Norms, Concealment, and Online Social Support

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore how LGBTQ+ young adults in Canada narratively negotiate family belonging, cultural expectations, identity concealment, digital visibility, and online social support across interconnected offline and online environments.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative digital narrative design was employed with 24 LGBTQ+ young adults aged 18–29 years residing in six Canadian provinces. Participants were recruited through purposive maximum-variation sampling from LGBTQ+ organizations, educational institutions, community services, and online networks. Data were collected using a demographic and digital-use questionnaire, participant-generated digital narrative maps, and individual semi-structured online interviews lasting 75–110 minutes. Interviews examined family relationships, cultural and religious expectations, disclosure decisions, concealment strategies, online identity expression, digital safety, and experiences of social support. Data were analyzed through an integrated narrative and reflexive thematic approach involving case summaries, inductive coding, within-case interpretation, cross-case comparison, theme development, and analysis of divergent accounts.

Findings: Five interrelated themes were identified: conditional family belonging and cultural regulation, concealment as relational and emotional labor, digital spaces as sites of identity recognition and rehearsal, online social support as chosen kinship, and visibility as an ongoing negotiation. Participants' narratives clustered into five configurations: contained visibility, selective bridging, fractured belonging, integrated but vigilant identity, and reclaimed privacy. Family belonging was rarely described as wholly accepting or rejecting; instead, it was shaped by changing combinations of affection, dependence, silence, cultural obligation, and selective recognition. Online environments enabled identity exploration, emotional validation, practical assistance, and chosen-family relationships, but also introduced risks involving surveillance, involuntary disclosure, misinformation, harassment, and intersectional exclusion.

Conclusion: LGBTQ+ young adults negotiated belonging through context-dependent and strategically managed forms of visibility rather than through a linear progression from concealment to disclosure. Family and digital environments were

mutually influential, and well-being depended largely on participants' control over identity information, material safety, culturally responsive support, and access to affirming relationships.

Keywords: *LGBTQ+ young adults; family belonging; identity concealment; digital narratives; online social support; cultural norms; disclosure; Canada*

1 Introduction

Belonging is a fundamental relational and social experience through which individuals understand where they are recognized, valued, protected, and permitted to express themselves. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority young people, however, belonging is frequently negotiated across environments that provide markedly different conditions of recognition. Families may offer emotional attachment, material support, cultural continuity, and a sense of origin while simultaneously communicating that heterosexuality, cisgender identity, gender conformity, marriage, or reproduction are prerequisites for full membership. A social-ecological perspective suggests that LGBTQ+ belonging cannot be reduced to an individual feeling or a single supportive relationship because it is produced through interactions among family systems, peer networks, institutions, cultural communities, physical settings, and digital environments (Matsick et al., 2024b). Belonging may therefore be secure in one domain and precarious in another, or it may depend on participants' ability to manage what different audiences know about them. The broader social-ecological model of LGBTQ+ belonging further emphasizes that recognition is shaped by interpersonal relationships as well as community norms, institutional structures, and dominant cultural narratives (Matsick et al., 2024a). This multidimensional understanding is especially relevant during emerging adulthood, when young people are often developing greater independence while remaining emotionally, financially, residually, or culturally connected to their families. For LGBTQ+ young adults, this period may involve not only identity exploration but also continual decisions about whether, when, where, and to whom an identity can be expressed.

Family relationships occupy a particularly complex position in these negotiations. Family acceptance can support psychological well-being, identity integration, and social connectedness, whereas rejection can disrupt attachment, housing, financial security, cultural membership, and access to everyday care. Accounts of family rejection among LGBTQ+ young adults demonstrate

that rejection is rarely experienced as a single negative reaction; rather, it can alter participants' understanding of love, trust, home, and their future place within the family (DeChants et al., 2022). Rejection may involve explicit hostility, threats, expulsion, coercive religious intervention, withdrawal of financial support, or attempts to control gender expression, but it may also take subtler forms such as avoidance, silence, conditional tolerance, denial, and refusal to acknowledge partners or identities. The psychological significance of these experiences is intensified because family relationships are often expected to provide unconditional recognition. When acceptance is partial or contingent, young people may remain deeply attached to relatives while also feeling that important parts of themselves must be hidden. Research involving transgender and gender-diverse youth has illustrated how family identity and queer identity can become psychologically separated, particularly when young people perceive that expressing one identity threatens membership in the other (Jones et al., 2024). Similarly, hidden or unspoken family experiences can produce enduring relational ambiguity even within families that are otherwise experienced as loving or cherished (Goldberg et al., 2023). These findings indicate that family belonging cannot be classified simply as acceptance or rejection; it often involves unstable combinations of affection, silence, dependence, recognition, and exclusion.

The importance of family acceptance is also shaped by cultural values, migration histories, racialization, religious traditions, and collective understandings of obligation. In many family systems, disclosure is not understood solely as an individual declaration but as an event with implications for parents, siblings, extended relatives, and community reputation. Research with Latinx caregivers of LGBTQ+ people indicates that cultural values and family processes can substantially influence both caregiver responses and mental health outcomes (Abreu et al., 2025). Among Filipino queer young adults, parental acceptance and connection to LGBTQ+ communities have likewise been associated with degrees of openness, suggesting that disclosure depends on the combined influence of family and community relationships (Marquez et al., 2024). Studies of Vietnamese LGBTQ+ young people show that agency during the transition to adulthood is exercised within, rather

than outside, cultural and intergenerational relationships (Mai, 2023). Multicultural analyses similarly demonstrate that LGBTQ+ identity development and resilience are shaped through culturally specific meanings of family, duty, morality, and social belonging (Lam-Nguyen, 2025). For queer South Asian women, the metaphor of the “closet” may be inadequate when concealment is intertwined with kinship obligations, racialized expectations, gendered respectability, and concerns about family continuity (Patel, 2025). The experiences of Arab-Palestinian gay men further show how multiple minority positions can expose individuals to overlapping forms of cultural, national, religious, and sexual marginalization (Postan-Aizik & Aboud-Halabi, 2026). These perspectives challenge models that treat disclosure as a universal progression from secrecy to authenticity and instead foreground the relational, cultural, and material contexts in which visibility becomes possible or dangerous.

Concealment is consequently better understood as an active and context-dependent practice than as a simple absence of disclosure. LGBTQ+ young adults may alter pronouns when discussing partners, avoid conversations about marriage, maintain separate social media accounts, change clothing before entering family spaces, conceal healthcare appointments, or monitor the visibility of friendships and online interactions. Systematic research on LGBTQ+ youth disclosure processes suggests that decisions to disclose are dynamic and influenced by anticipated reactions, perceived safety, relational closeness, developmental timing, and the availability of support (Mousavi et al., 2024). Reviews of coming out and self-disclosure similarly emphasize that disclosure is not a singular event but a repeated process that differs across family, educational, occupational, and community contexts (Sahoo et al., 2023). Concealment may protect young adults from violence, financial loss, housing instability, or relational rupture, yet sustained concealment can also require continuous self-monitoring and emotional regulation. Among bisexual youth, concealment and low parental support have been linked to suicidality, illustrating the potential psychological cost of managing identity without adequate family affirmation (Reyes et al., 2022). Weekly diary research with Chinese LGBTQ+ young adults further indicates that perceived parental attitudes and mental well-being are dynamically connected over time rather than fixed in a single family response (Wang et al., 2024). Concealment can therefore be simultaneously protective and burdensome: it may preserve immediate safety while intensifying vigilance, loneliness, identity fragmentation, or

uncertainty about whether family affection would continue if the concealed identity became known.

The consequences of family conflict and minority stress are particularly important because LGBTQ+ young adults may face multiple and cumulative stressors. Social exclusion has been associated with a broad range of psychological difficulties through interacting neurobiological, interpersonal, and structural mechanisms (Kaprinis & Charalampakis, 2025). Latent-class research indicates that LGBTQ+ young adults are often exposed to clusters of sexually minoritized and gender-expansive stressors rather than isolated experiences, with different combinations of rejection, discrimination, victimization, and concealment carrying distinct mental health implications (Shrader et al., 2024). International evidence has also linked conflict, nonacceptance, and discrimination with poorer mental well-being among LGBTQ+-identified individuals (Toh et al., 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, young adults who lived with parents often experienced intensified exposure to family environments in which identity expression was restricted, producing distinct patterns of psychological adjustment (Vázquez et al., 2023). LGBTQ+ college students described their identities as becoming an “elephant in the room” when they returned to family homes where identity-related topics were avoided or contested (Hanna-Walker et al., 2023). Observations from gender-sexuality alliances similarly showed that pandemic-related disruption reduced access to affirming school and peer environments while increasing dependence on home settings that were not consistently supportive (Baerwolf, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of examining home not merely as a residence but as a relational environment in which safety, silence, dependence, and belonging are continually negotiated.

Material conditions can further constrain disclosure and family separation. LGBTQ+ and nonbinary young adults who face housing precarity may have limited capacity to leave rejecting or controlling households, making concealment a strategy for maintaining shelter and economic survival (Flood & Hochstenbach, 2024). Undocumented queer emerging adults may encounter even more complex dependencies because legal status, employment insecurity, family relationships, and sexual or gender identity are mutually implicated (Bogdan, 2025). Transnational sexualities can also influence living arrangements by shaping whether LGBTQ+ adults remain with relatives, live alone, migrate, or establish households outside conventional family structures (Ghosh, 2024). Young adults with

disabilities may face additional barriers to independence, privacy, community access, and affirming care, and their LGBTQ+ experiences cannot be understood separately from ableism and reliance on caregivers (Kempapidis et al., 2023). These material and intersectional conditions demonstrate why nondisclosure cannot automatically be interpreted as passivity, denial, or psychological immaturity. In some circumstances, concealment is a deliberate response to unequal access to housing, income, healthcare, transportation, legal protection, and social support. At the same time, young adults may resist exclusion through creativity and identity reconstruction. Trans young adults of color, for example, have described creativity as a resource for reclaiming identity, agency, and connection amid intersecting forms of marginalization (Pease et al., 2024). Black LGBTQ+ young adults may also engage in intersectional activism as a way of responding to both external discrimination and marginalization within LGBTQ+ communities (Shaheed et al., 2022). Agency, therefore, does not always take the form of direct disclosure; it may be expressed through selective participation, cultural reinterpretation, creative practice, boundary setting, or the construction of alternative communities.

Digital environments have become central to these alternative forms of recognition and support. For young adults whose families, schools, religious institutions, or local communities provide little LGBTQ+-affirming language, online spaces may offer the first opportunity to encounter identity concepts, personal narratives, and representations of possible futures. Digital media can facilitate anonymous exploration, observation of others' experiences, experimentation with names and pronouns, and gradual participation in LGBTQ+ communities. Social media coming-out strategies among young gay men demonstrate that platforms can be used to manage audiences, control timing, and communicate identity through direct, indirect, or selectively visible methods (Jerome & Ahmad Junaidi bin Ahmad, 2022). These affordances are particularly significant because digital visibility does not require the same form of exposure in every environment. A young person may be visible within a closed group, pseudonymous account, gaming community, or private messaging network while remaining concealed from family members. Online spaces may thus serve as transitional or parallel settings in which identities are rehearsed and relational responses are tested before any offline disclosure occurs.

Digital social support can provide emotional validation, practical knowledge, peer mentoring, crisis assistance, and

chosen-family relationships. Studies of coping with minority stress show that queer young adults use multiple strategies, including connection with affirming communities, identity-based meaning making, behavioral avoidance, and active problem solving, with different strategies associated with different mental health outcomes (Xu et al., 2024). Online communities may expand access to these coping resources, particularly for individuals who are geographically isolated or who cannot safely attend in-person LGBTQ+ organizations. Supportive digital contacts can help young adults evaluate disclosure risks, interpret family reactions, find affirming healthcare, secure emergency housing, or learn how others have navigated similar cultural conflicts. Phenomenological work with Thai LGBTQ+ adolescents highlights the importance of support during self-discovery and recovery from depression, especially when young people lack affirming relationships in their immediate environments (Pensuksan et al., 2025). A broader sense of belonging can also protect young people by providing continuity, recognition, and relationships in which their experiences are understood. Evidence concerning care-experienced young people, although not limited to LGBTQ+ populations, reinforces that belonging is fostered through stable relationships, participation, recognition, and meaningful connection rather than through physical inclusion alone (Critchlow et al., 2026). For LGBTQ+ young adults, digital communities may perform these functions when family belonging is uncertain or conditional.

Nevertheless, online visibility and support are not inherently safe or universally accessible. Digital platforms can expose users to harassment, outing, surveillance, misinformation, sexual exploitation, racism, transphobia, biphobia, ableism, and identity gatekeeping. Algorithmic recommendations, shared devices, contact synchronization, location data, screenshots, and notification previews can connect identities that participants attempt to keep separate. Young adults may therefore be visible to supportive peers while simultaneously fearing that relatives will discover their digital activity. Online LGBTQ+ spaces may also reproduce dominant cultural hierarchies, leaving racialized, disabled, religious, immigrant, bisexual, transgender, or nonbinary users insufficiently represented. The mental healthcare literature concerning LGBTQ+ people of color similarly shows that support systems can fail when providers or institutions ignore intersectional identities, cultural meanings, and experiences of discrimination (Ito et al., 2025). Digital support must therefore be examined not only in terms of availability but also in terms of cultural

responsiveness, trust, privacy, and the power relations that determine whose identity narratives are treated as legitimate.

The content young people encounter online is also shaped by broader gaps in formal education. Inclusive sexuality education can provide language, health information, and recognition for LGBTQIA+ adolescents, yet many educational systems remain organized around cisgender and heterosexual assumptions (Eleuteri et al., 2024). In the absence of inclusive education, social media and online communities may become primary sources of information about identity, relationships, sexual health, transition, and family disclosure. While this access can be empowering, it can also expose young people to inaccurate information or idealized narratives of visibility. Highly public coming-out stories may imply that complete disclosure is the natural or morally superior outcome of identity development. Such narratives may unintentionally marginalize individuals who choose privacy, remain dependent on family, or understand belonging through cultural frameworks that do not prioritize individual disclosure. Research on sexual and gender minority youth more broadly emphasizes that healthy development depends on supportive contexts and structural protections, not solely on young people's capacity to declare or defend their identities (Russell & Dorri, 2023). Risk and protective factors for suicidality likewise operate across individual, family, peer, institutional, community, and societal levels, indicating that responsibility cannot be placed exclusively on young people to become resilient within hostile environments (Wallace et al., 2024).

These tensions suggest that the relationship between family belonging and digital support is not adequately captured by a simple opposition between an unsafe home and a liberating internet. Families may be rejecting, ambivalent, changing, or selectively supportive, while digital spaces may be affirming in some respects and exclusionary in others. Young adults may use online support to prepare for family disclosure, but they may also use it to strengthen a decision not to disclose. Digital chosen families may compensate for emotional absence at home, yet they may coexist with enduring attachment to parents and relatives. Even after family acceptance, young adults may continue to manage visibility across cultural communities, workplaces, healthcare settings, or public platforms. Mental health outcomes are consequently shaped by the interaction of relational support, material security, identity recognition, exposure to stigma, and access to culturally responsive resources. Research on the varied lived experiences of LGBTQ+ young people demonstrates that support must

address identity exploration, family relations, depression, discrimination, and social context simultaneously rather than treating these as independent concerns (Pensuksan et al., 2025). Similarly, the diversity of stress and coping experiences indicates that no single pathway of disclosure, resilience, or belonging can represent all LGBTQ+ young adults.

A digital narrative approach is well suited to studying these processes because it attends to how individuals organize experiences across time, relationships, and mediated environments. Narratives reveal not only what happened but how young adults interpret the meaning of silence, disclosure, family obligation, online visibility, and support. They can show how past events are reinterpreted after participants encounter new identity language, how digital interactions become turning points, and how family relationships change as young adults gain independence or revise boundaries. Digital narratives also permit examination of the ways platform affordances shape storytelling itself. Pseudonyms, private groups, temporary posts, restricted audiences, and multiple accounts allow users to construct different versions of identity for different publics. These practices should not automatically be treated as inconsistency; they may represent sophisticated forms of audience management and relational safety. The distinction is especially important because current scholarship has often examined family rejection, disclosure, minority stress, housing, or online support as separate topics. Less attention has been paid to how LGBTQ+ young adults narratively connect these domains and how digital belonging influences their continuing attachment to families and cultures.

The Canadian context provides a particularly relevant setting for this investigation. Although Canada is frequently characterized by comparatively strong legal recognition and public acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, formal rights do not eliminate interpersonal rejection, cultural conflict, housing dependence, or unequal access to affirming services. Young adults may live within a legally supportive national environment while remaining embedded in families or communities where sexual and gender diversity is stigmatized. They may also encounter racism, colonialism, migration-related pressures, religious exclusion, disability barriers, or economic insecurity that shape whether formal protections are practically accessible. Studies of LGBTQ+ experiences across countries with relatively high levels of acceptance show that suicidality and distress remain influenced by family, peer, institutional, and structural conditions despite favorable national indicators (Wallace et

al., 2024). This discrepancy between public visibility and private silence makes it necessary to examine how young adults experience belonging at home while participating in digital cultures that may offer more visible LGBTQ+ representation.

Existing scholarship provides substantial evidence regarding the harms of rejection, the complexity of disclosure, and the protective potential of community connection, yet important interpretive gaps remain. Research has established that nonacceptance and discrimination are associated with psychological distress (Toh et al., 2023), that identity expression may become constrained within family homes (Hanna-Walker et al., 2023), and that online platforms offer strategic opportunities for controlled disclosure (Jerome & Ahmad Junaidi bin Ahmad, 2022). Other studies demonstrate that family relationships are shaped by cultural values (Abreu et al., 2025), that intersectional identities influence experiences of support and exclusion (Postan-Aizik & Aboud-Halabi, 2026), and that material precarity may limit the feasibility of leaving unsupportive environments (Flood & Hochstenbach, 2024). What remains less fully understood is how these dimensions are woven together in young adults' own stories: how they preserve affection for relatives while concealing identity, how cultural expectations influence digital practices, how online support changes their definitions of family, and how visibility is calibrated across shifting audiences. Examining these narratives can move beyond binary models of acceptance versus rejection and openness versus concealment by identifying the relational strategies through which young adults construct livable forms of belonging.

Accordingly, this study aimed to explore how LGBTQ+ young adults in Canada narratively negotiate family belonging, cultural norms, identity concealment, digital visibility, and online social support across interconnected offline and online environments.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative digital narrative design to examine how LGBTQ+ young adults in Canada constructed, communicated, and negotiated experiences of family belonging, cultural expectations, identity concealment, and online social support. Digital narrative inquiry was selected because the experiences under investigation were shaped not only by participants' offline

family relationships but also by their interactions within digitally mediated environments. This approach made it possible to explore how participants organized their experiences into stories, assigned meaning to significant events, represented different aspects of themselves across social contexts, and used online spaces to manage tensions between visibility and concealment. The study was informed by a constructivist epistemological orientation, according to which personal narratives are not treated as objective records of events but as contextually produced accounts shaped by memory, relationships, cultural discourses, technological environments, and the interaction between participants and researchers. An intersectional perspective also guided the research process by recognizing that sexual orientation and gender identity interacted with ethnicity, race, religion, migration history, socioeconomic position, geographic location, disability, and family structure in shaping participants' experiences.

The study included exactly 24 LGBTQ+ young adults between 18 and 29 years of age who were residing in Canada at the time of data collection. Participants were recruited from six Canadian provinces, including Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba. The sample included individuals living in large metropolitan areas, suburban communities, smaller cities, and rural or geographically isolated locations. Participants represented diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, transgender, nonbinary, gender-fluid, and questioning identities. Diversity was also sought in relation to racialized identity, cultural background, religious upbringing, immigration history, family composition, educational status, employment status, and degree of openness about LGBTQ+ identity. This variation was important because the meaning of family belonging and the risks associated with disclosure or concealment could differ substantially according to participants' social, cultural, and material circumstances.

Participants were recruited through purposive maximum-variation sampling. Recruitment notices were distributed electronically through LGBTQ+ community organizations, university and college equity offices, youth support services, community health centers, online LGBTQ+ groups, and social media pages serving young adults in Canada. Snowball recruitment was used cautiously by inviting enrolled participants to share the public recruitment notice with potentially eligible individuals without disclosing whether they had personally participated in the study. Interested individuals contacted the research team directly

through a secure study email address and completed a brief eligibility screening form. To be eligible, individuals were required to be between 18 and 29 years of age, currently reside in Canada, self-identify as LGBTQ+ or as belonging to a sexual or gender minority, have experience negotiating their LGBTQ+ identity within a family or family-like context, and have used at least one online platform or digitally mediated community for identity expression, information seeking, social connection, emotional support, or communication with other LGBTQ+ individuals. Participants also needed sufficient English proficiency to participate in an in-depth interview and the capacity to provide informed consent. Individuals were not required to be openly LGBTQ+ within their families, because concealment, selective disclosure, and uncertainty about disclosure were central phenomena in the study.

Recruitment continued until 24 participants had completed the study. The final sample size was determined through the principle of information power and the achievement of narrative sufficiency rather than through statistical representativeness. By the twenty-fourth interview, the dataset contained sufficient depth and diversity to examine both recurring patterns and meaningful differences across family, cultural, geographic, and digital contexts. Particular attention was given to avoiding premature closure when dominant narratives emerged. Recruitment therefore continued until the researchers had obtained accounts that included supportive, ambivalent, rejecting, controlling, culturally conflicted, and geographically isolated family environments, as well as different patterns of online participation ranging from anonymous observation to highly visible digital advocacy.

2.2 Measures

Data were collected through a demographic and digital-use questionnaire, a participant-generated digital narrative map, and an individual semi-structured digital narrative interview. These tools were designed to produce contextual, chronological, relational, and digitally situated accounts of participants' experiences. Before the interview, participants completed a secure online questionnaire that collected information about age, gender identity, sexual orientation, pronouns, province of residence, type of residential community, racial or ethnic background, religious or cultural background, immigration or generational status, educational or occupational status, current living arrangement, family composition, degree of disclosure to family members, and

commonly used digital platforms. The questionnaire also asked participants to indicate the primary purposes for which they used online spaces, such as seeking information, observing other LGBTQ+ people, making friends, accessing emotional support, exploring identity labels, participating in advocacy, dating, sharing personal experiences, or communicating anonymously. These data were used to describe the sample and to support interpretation of each participant's narrative context rather than to generate quantitative comparisons.

The participant-generated digital narrative map served as an elicitation tool that helped participants identify significant experiences before the interview. Participants were invited to create a brief chronological map containing between four and eight important moments related to becoming aware of their LGBTQ+ identity, recognizing family or cultural expectations, deciding whether to disclose or conceal their identity, encountering acceptance or rejection, discovering online LGBTQ+ content, joining digital communities, receiving online support, or experiencing digital conflict or harassment. Participants could prepare the map as a written timeline, a simple diagram, a sequence of short descriptions, or a collection of symbols and images. Artistic ability was neither required nor evaluated. Participants decided how much information to include and were instructed not to provide usernames, account links, identifiable photographs, or information that could expose another person's identity. The narrative map was used during the interview to support memory, clarify the sequence of events, and allow participants to determine which experiences were most important to their stories.

Individual interviews were conducted through an encrypted videoconferencing platform and lasted approximately 75 to 110 minutes. Participants could keep their cameras turned off, use a chosen display name, and participate from a private location selected by them. The interview guide was semi-structured so that the same broad domains were explored across participants while allowing each person to organize the account according to their own experiences and priorities. The interviews began with an open narrative prompt inviting participants to describe the story of how they came to understand their LGBTQ+ identity and how this understanding affected their sense of belonging within their family. Subsequent prompts explored family relationships, cultural and religious expectations, perceived obligations to parents and relatives, experiences of affection and exclusion, disclosure decisions, concealment strategies, selective identity presentation, emotional

consequences of silence, changes in family relationships over time, and the meaning participants attached to acceptance, tolerance, rejection, and belonging.

The digital dimension of participants' narratives was explored through questions about when and how they first encountered LGBTQ+-related information online, which platforms they considered supportive or unsafe, how they presented themselves in different digital spaces, and whether online relationships compensated for limited support within their families or local communities. Participants were asked to describe significant online interactions, including moments when they felt recognized, believed, protected, informed, or connected, as well as experiences involving surveillance, outing, harassment, misinformation, exclusion, racism, transphobia, or pressure to present identity in particular ways. Additional prompts examined how platform features such as anonymity, private messaging, pseudonymous accounts, closed groups, content recommendation systems, temporary posts, audience controls, and blocking functions influenced participants' ability to seek support and manage visibility. The interviewer also explored whether online support strengthened participants' capacity to communicate with family members, intensified conflict between online and offline identities, or created new expectations regarding disclosure and authenticity.

Participants were invited, but not required, to discuss a small number of self-selected digital artifacts that represented meaningful elements of their experiences. These artifacts could include anonymized screenshots, text excerpts, memes, digital artwork, saved messages, posts written by the participant, profile descriptions, or images associated with important online communities. Separate consent was obtained for discussing and retaining each artifact. Participants could describe an artifact verbally without sending a copy, and they could withdraw an artifact from the dataset without withdrawing from the interview. Materials created by third parties were not reproduced in publications, and private conversations were not collected unless all identifiable information had been removed and the material could be discussed without exposing another person. The study did not involve covert observation, direct access to participants' social media accounts, extraction of platform data, or the collection of publicly available posts without consent. This participant-controlled procedure was used to maintain privacy and to prevent the research team from treating online accessibility as equivalent to ethical permission.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer prepared field notes immediately after each session to document contextual information, emotional tone, interruptions, significant narrative shifts, observations about the use of digital artifacts, and preliminary analytic reflections. Transcripts were checked against the recordings for accuracy and then de-identified. Names, usernames, workplaces, educational institutions, specific communities, and distinctive family details were removed or replaced with broader descriptions. Participants were offered the opportunity to clarify factual details or add brief reflections after the interview through secure email communication. Audio files, transcripts, consent forms, demographic questionnaires, narrative maps, and approved digital artifacts were stored in encrypted folders on a password-protected institutional server. Consent forms and contact information were stored separately from the qualitative dataset.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an integrated narrative and reflexive thematic approach. The narrative component focused on how participants structured their experiences over time, positioned themselves and others within their stories, and connected family relationships with digital identity practices. The thematic component was used to identify recurring patterns across participants while preserving differences in cultural background, family context, gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic location, and online participation. Analysis was conducted at both the individual-case level and the cross-case level. This combination was necessary because the research questions concerned shared processes, such as concealment and online support, but also required attention to the distinct sequence, meaning, and relational context of each participant's experience.

Analysis began with repeated reading of each transcript alongside the participant's demographic information, narrative map, interviewer field notes, and any participant-approved digital artifacts. The researchers first prepared a narrative case summary for every participant. Each summary described the participant's family and cultural context, the development of LGBTQ+ self-understanding, major disclosure or concealment decisions, significant moments of belonging or exclusion, entry into online LGBTQ+ spaces, changes in online participation, and the relationship between

digital support and offline family life. Particular attention was paid to turning points, contradictions, unresolved tensions, and changes in the participant's interpretation of past events. The summaries also documented how participants positioned themselves in relation to family members, cultural communities, LGBTQ+ communities, and imagined online audiences.

Initial coding was then conducted inductively using NVivo qualitative data-analysis software. Codes were assigned to segments of text that represented actions, emotions, relationships, cultural expectations, digital practices, identity strategies, and perceived consequences. Examples of coding domains included conditional family acceptance, fear of disappointing parents, protection of family reputation, emotional self-censorship, selective disclosure, compartmentalized identities, anonymous exploration, platform-based belonging, peer validation, digital chosen family, online surveillance, exposure to harassment, strategic audience management, and movement between concealment and visibility. Coding remained flexible and interpretive rather than being restricted to a predetermined codebook. Reflexive memos were written throughout the process to document developing interpretations, methodological decisions, researcher assumptions, and questions requiring further examination.

Following initial coding, related codes were compared within each case to identify the narrative functions they performed. The analysis examined whether concealment was narrated as fear, protection, resistance, loyalty, necessity, autonomy, or temporary preparation. Similarly, online visibility was examined as a source of affirmation, experimentation, connection, vulnerability, advocacy, or pressure. This stage prevented apparently similar behaviors from being treated as psychologically or culturally equivalent. For example, withholding identity information from family members could represent fear of violence in one narrative, concern for financial dependence in another, protection of an older relative in a third, or a deliberate rejection of the expectation that LGBTQ+ people must publicly disclose themselves in a fourth. Digital participation was interpreted with the same attention to context, recognizing that anonymous observation, private messaging, public posting, and online advocacy represented different forms of visibility and carried different interpersonal risks.

Cross-case analysis was subsequently conducted to identify broader patterns connecting family belonging, cultural norms, concealment, and online social support.

Codes were clustered into preliminary themes, which were reviewed against complete transcripts and narrative summaries. Themes were refined according to internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, explanatory value, and their capacity to represent both dominant and divergent experiences. The researchers actively searched for negative cases and contradictory narratives, including participants who experienced strong family support but limited online belonging, participants who considered concealment protective rather than oppressive, and participants who found online LGBTQ+ spaces exclusionary or culturally unresponsive. These cases were retained within the analysis to prevent the findings from presenting offline families as uniformly rejecting or digital communities as uniformly supportive.

The temporal organization of participants' stories was analyzed by examining how meanings changed across adolescence and young adulthood. Particular attention was given to transitions such as leaving the parental home, entering higher education, moving to a larger city, beginning employment, entering a relationship, changing gender presentation, receiving financial independence, migrating within or to Canada, and establishing a chosen family. The analysis also considered how participants retrospectively reinterpreted earlier experiences after gaining access to LGBTQ+ language, communities, and cultural knowledge online. Digital narratives were therefore understood as evolving accounts in which participants repeatedly revised the meaning of family silence, cultural obligation, concealment, disclosure, and belonging.

Analytic rigor was supported through reflexive journaling, detailed documentation of coding and theme-development decisions, regular analytic discussions within the research team, and repeated comparison of emerging interpretations with the complete dataset. A subset of transcripts and narrative summaries was reviewed collaboratively by two members of the research team to identify overlooked assumptions and refine conceptual distinctions. This process was used to deepen interpretation rather than to calculate inter-coder agreement, because the analysis recognized qualitative interpretation as reflexive and context-dependent. Preliminary thematic interpretations were also compared with participants' language and narrative structures to ensure that abstract themes remained grounded in their accounts. Quotations selected for reporting were reviewed carefully to protect confidentiality, particularly when narratives involved small cultural

communities, distinctive family circumstances, or potentially identifiable digital events.

Credibility was enhanced by collecting detailed narratives, using multiple forms of participant-generated material, examining divergent cases, and maintaining close connections between themes and the original accounts. Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting recruitment, data collection, transcription, coding, theme development, and revisions to the analytic framework. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memos addressing the researchers' social positions, assumptions about disclosure and authenticity, and possible tendencies to idealize online communities or pathologize family-based concealment. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the participants' social, cultural, geographic, and digital contexts. The final analysis sought to explain not simply whether family or online environments were supportive, but how LGBTQ+ young adults moved between these environments, managed different forms of visibility, interpreted cultural obligations, and constructed belonging across interconnected offline and digital worlds.

3 Findings and Results

The 24 participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 23.7 years and a standard deviation of 3.2 years. The sample included seven cisgender women, six cisgender men, five nonbinary participants, three transgender men, two transgender women, and one gender-fluid participant. Based on participants' primary self-descriptions, seven identified as bisexual, five as gay, four as lesbian, four as pansexual, three as queer, and one as questioning. Ten participants identified as White or as having European ancestry, four identified as South Asian,

three as East or Southeast Asian, two as Black, two as Middle Eastern or North African, two as Indigenous, and one described a mixed ethnocultural background. Six participants had immigrated to Canada, seven were Canadian-born children of immigrant parents, and 11 were third-generation Canadians or did not identify migration as a central dimension of their family history. Fifteen participants reported having been raised within an organized religious tradition, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, and other faith traditions, whereas nine described their family upbringing as secular or nonreligious. Participants resided in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba. Fourteen lived in large metropolitan areas, five lived in medium-sized cities, three lived in suburban communities, and two lived in rural or geographically isolated locations. At the time of the interviews, eight participants lived with parents or other relatives, seven lived alone or with a romantic partner, six lived with roommates, and three lived in university or college residences. Six participants described themselves as fully open about their LGBTQ+ identity to their immediate family, 11 had disclosed selectively to one or more family members, and seven had not disclosed their identity to parents or primary caregivers. All participants had used online spaces to obtain LGBTQ+-related information or support. Eighteen had used anonymous or pseudonymous accounts, 15 had participated in closed online groups, private servers, or moderated communities, 13 regularly used direct messaging to communicate with LGBTQ+ peers, and 10 had publicly posted LGBTQ+-related content under an account connected to their offline identity. These forms of digital participation were overlapping and changed according to perceived safety, family surveillance, platform norms, and the degree to which participants wished to connect their online identities with their everyday lives.

Table 1

Main Themes and Subthemes Identified in the Digital Narratives

Main theme	Subthemes	Central analytic meaning	Participants represented
Conditional family belonging and cultural regulation	Affection linked to conformity; protection of family reputation; religious and moral expectations; gendered family roles; selective support from relatives	Family belonging was often experienced as emotionally meaningful but conditional upon silence, heterosexual or cisgender presentation, and compliance with cultural expectations	22
Concealment as relational and emotional labor	Continuous self-monitoring; compartmentalization; code-switching; management of digital traces; financial and residential dependence; silence as protection	Concealment required sustained cognitive and emotional work and was used not only because of shame or fear but also to preserve safety, housing, relationships, and personal control	21
Digital spaces as sites of identity recognition and rehearsal	Learning identity language; observing before participating; experimenting with names, pronouns, and presentation; testing disclosure narratives; managing multiple audiences	Online environments allowed participants to recognize, name, and rehearse identities that could not yet be expressed safely in family settings	23

Online social support as chosen kinship	Emotional validation; practical information; peer mentoring; crisis support; mutual recognition; continuity of contact	Digitally mediated relationships frequently performed family-like functions by providing affirmation, care, advice, and a sense of being understood	20
Visibility and belonging as an ongoing negotiation	Calibrated disclosure; selective openness; movement between platforms; renegotiation of family boundaries; resistance to compulsory disclosure	Visibility was not a single transition from secrecy to openness but a continuing process shaped by context, risk, relationships, and personal definitions of privacy	19

Table 1 presents the five interrelated themes through which participants narrated the relationship between family belonging, cultural expectations, concealment, online identity expression, and social support. The most pervasive finding was that participants did not ordinarily describe family belonging as either completely present or entirely absent. Instead, belonging was experienced as conditional, uneven, and continuously evaluated through everyday interactions. Twenty-two participants described some form of tension between maintaining connection with family members and expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity. In many accounts, family affection remained emotionally significant, but its availability appeared to depend on continued conformity to heterosexual, cisgender, religious, or gendered expectations. Participants described being included in family routines, receiving material care, and feeling loved while simultaneously recognizing that particular aspects of themselves were unspeakable. This produced an ambiguous form of membership in which participants were physically present and relationally attached but not fully recognizable within the family. For participants from collectivist, immigrant, racialized, or religiously observant households, identity disclosure was often interpreted as an event affecting the entire family rather than as an exclusively individual decision. The anticipated consequences included parental shame, conflict between relatives, damage to family reputation, accusations of cultural disloyalty, and fears that younger siblings would be negatively influenced. Several participants therefore understood concealment as a way of managing obligations to parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family members. Cultural norms did not operate merely as abstract beliefs; they were communicated through comments about marriage, grandchildren, masculinity, femininity, clothing, religious observance, and appropriate relationships. Repeated questions about future spouses or gendered family roles functioned as reminders of the life trajectory that relatives expected participants to follow. At the same time, family environments were rarely uniform. Some participants described one parent as more supportive than the other, siblings who protected them from intrusive questions, cousins who knew their identity but maintained

confidentiality, or relatives who expressed private acceptance while refusing to acknowledge the identity publicly. These partial alliances allowed participants to retain some family connection, but they could also reinforce secrecy by establishing separate levels of knowledge within the same household. The second theme demonstrated that concealment was not a passive absence of disclosure. Twenty-one participants described it as active relational labor requiring continuous attention to speech, appearance, online activity, friendships, romantic relationships, and emotional responses. Participants changed pronouns when discussing partners, described dates as meetings with friends, removed notifications from locked screens, restricted family access to social media accounts, deleted browsing histories, altered clothing before returning home, and avoided political or LGBTQ+-related discussions that could generate suspicion. This labor intensified for participants who lived with parents, relied on family financially, or belonged to closely connected cultural communities in which information could travel rapidly through relatives and community networks. Concealment was frequently accompanied by vigilance, anticipatory anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of fragmentation between different versions of the self. Nevertheless, participants did not universally portray concealment as evidence of internalized stigma. Some treated it as a pragmatic safety strategy, a temporary response to material dependence, or an exercise of privacy in environments that had not earned access to intimate information. The third theme, represented in 23 narratives, concerned the role of online environments in identity recognition and rehearsal. Many participants encountered words such as bisexual, nonbinary, transgender, pansexual, gender-fluid, queer, dysphoria, chosen family, and minority stress online before they heard them discussed in their homes, schools, or local communities. Digital content enabled participants to compare their feelings with the experiences of others and to reinterpret earlier confusion as part of a recognizable identity process. Observation often preceded active participation. Participants described spending months or years reading forums, watching videos, following creators, or viewing discussions without commenting. This low-visibility

participation allowed them to learn community language and norms while limiting the risks associated with direct engagement. Online spaces also functioned as laboratories for identity presentation. Participants tested names, pronouns, profile photographs, clothing styles, humor, and personal narratives with audiences who did not know their families. Positive responses could make an emerging identity feel more coherent, although negative feedback could intensify uncertainty. The fourth theme showed that online social support extended beyond access to information. For 20 participants, online relationships provided forms of care resembling chosen kinship. Participants received reassurance after family conflict, assistance in evaluating whether disclosure was safe, advice about housing and health services, encouragement during gender transition, and companionship during periods of isolation. Support was particularly important for participants living in rural areas or culturally restrictive households, as local access to affirming peers was limited. Nevertheless, digital communities were not represented as uniformly safe.

Racism, transphobia, biphobia, body-based judgment, exclusion of disabled people, and pressure to adopt particular political or identity language complicated participants' sense of online belonging. The fifth theme integrated these tensions by showing that visibility was rarely narrated as a completed or universally desirable endpoint. Participants were differently visible to parents, siblings, friends, employers, religious communities, cultural communities, and online audiences. Disclosure was repeatedly revised as circumstances changed. Moving away from home, gaining financial independence, beginning a relationship, transitioning, changing employment, or reconnecting with relatives could alter the perceived balance between openness and safety. Participants consequently rejected the assumption that authentic identity required complete public disclosure. Their narratives suggested that belonging was negotiated through selective visibility, controlled access, relational testing, and the continuing evaluation of who could be trusted with particular forms of knowledge.

Table 2

Cross-Case Configurations of Family Belonging, Concealment, and Digital Visibility

Narrative configuration	Number of participants	Family context	Pattern of concealment or disclosure	Role of online environments	Dominant narrative outcome
Contained visibility	7	Family relationships remained important, but LGBTQ+ identities were perceived as unacceptable, dangerous, or incompatible with cultural expectations	Participants were largely concealed at home and carefully separated online and offline identities	Online spaces provided the primary setting for open identity expression, peer contact, and emotional relief	Continued family membership was maintained through compartmentalization, but participants experienced fatigue and fear of accidental disclosure
Selective bridging	6	Families were mixed, uncertain, or gradually changing, with support available from particular relatives	Disclosure occurred selectively and was expanded only after relatives demonstrated trust or acceptance	Online peers helped participants prepare conversations, interpret family responses, and identify disclosure strategies	Participants developed partial integration between family and LGBTQ+ identities while retaining boundaries with less supportive relatives
Fractured belonging	5	Participants experienced rejection, hostility, coercive control, forced religious intervention, or serious relational rupture	Disclosure was followed by withdrawal, conflict, displacement, or intensified concealment	Digital communities became primary sources of belonging, practical assistance, and chosen-family relationships	Participants reconstructed belonging outside the family of origin, although grief and unresolved attachment remained prominent
Integrated but vigilant	4	Immediate family relationships were broadly accepting, although extended family, cultural communities, workplaces, or public environments remained uncertain	Participants were open within close family relationships but selective in broader social settings	Online spaces supported advocacy, community participation, and access to identity-specific information	Family acceptance reduced but did not eliminate the need for audience management and caution
Reclaimed privacy	2	Family relationships were neither openly rejecting nor considered entitled to complete personal information	Participants deliberately rejected pressure to disclose and framed nondisclosure as autonomy rather than fear	Online engagement was selective and did not necessarily involve public identity performance	Belonging was defined through self-determined boundaries rather than through full disclosure or universal visibility

Table 2 demonstrates that the participants' accounts could be organized into five cross-case narrative configurations, although these configurations were not treated as fixed personality types or sequential stages. The largest configuration, contained visibility, included seven participants who remained strongly connected to their families while believing that direct disclosure would threaten emotional, material, or physical security. These participants often lived in two closely managed social worlds. At home, they complied with expected gender presentation, avoided references to romantic interests, and participated in family discussions about marriage or future children without challenging the underlying assumptions. Online, they used chosen names, disclosed their identities, discussed relationships, and developed friendships that were largely invisible to their relatives. The contrast between these environments generated relief and distress simultaneously. Online visibility permitted participants to experience recognition, but it also increased the stakes of accidental exposure. Participants in this configuration described checking privacy settings repeatedly, using separate email addresses, disabling preview notifications, restricting family members, and monitoring whether shared contacts could connect their profiles. Their central concern was not simply that relatives might discover an LGBTQ+ identity; it was that the discovery would occur without preparation, control, or the ability to manage its consequences. Family membership was therefore preserved through compartmentalization, but the maintenance of separate identities produced exhaustion and limited the depth of family intimacy. The selective bridging configuration included six participants whose families contained both risk and potential support. These participants typically disclosed first to a sibling, cousin, or parent perceived as emotionally flexible. The response to this initial disclosure became a test of whether openness could be extended to other relatives. Online peers were especially influential in this process. They helped participants rehearse conversations, anticipate common family reactions, locate culturally appropriate language, and distinguish temporary confusion from sustained rejection. Some participants used educational videos, translated resources, religiously affirming interpretations, or stories from LGBTQ+ people with similar ethnic backgrounds to communicate with relatives. Digital support did not replace family belonging in these cases; rather, it helped participants negotiate the terms under which family relationships might become more inclusive. Progress was nonlinear. A parent might become

supportive privately while continuing to avoid the subject with extended family, or a sibling might affirm the participant while warning against disclosure to grandparents. Participants in this configuration often accepted partial recognition as meaningful, even when it fell short of complete openness. The fractured-belonging configuration involved five participants whose disclosure or discovery led to serious conflict. Their accounts included verbal hostility, threats of expulsion, confiscation of devices, restrictions on friendships, coercive religious counseling, attempts to control gender presentation, and periods of estrangement. For these participants, the loss of family belonging was not limited to the rejection of an identity label. It involved disruption of housing, financial security, cultural continuity, religious community, family rituals, and relationships with siblings or extended relatives. Online communities became essential because they supplied both emotional and practical support. Participants obtained temporary accommodation, information about LGBTQ+-affirming services, financial advice, transportation assistance, and connections to local community organizations through digital networks. Several formed enduring relationships with older LGBTQ+ peers who acted as mentors during periods of instability. However, the construction of chosen family did not eliminate grief for the family of origin. Participants continued to express attachment, anger, longing, and uncertainty about future reconciliation. Digital belonging therefore functioned as reconstruction rather than simple replacement. The integrated-but-vigilant configuration included four participants who described their immediate families as broadly accepting. These participants could discuss partners, gender identity, or LGBTQ+-related experiences at home and did not need to maintain substantial concealment from parents or siblings. Nevertheless, their narratives showed that acceptance in one relational setting did not create universal safety. Participants remained cautious with extended family members, employers, religious communities, cultural organizations, and unfamiliar online audiences. Some were also concerned that public digital visibility might expose supportive family members to criticism within ethnic or religious communities. Online engagement in this configuration was more likely to include advocacy, public education, and participation in identity-specific groups. Even so, participants used privacy controls and audience segmentation, indicating that family acceptance reduced but did not remove the need for strategic visibility. The final configuration, reclaimed privacy, included two participants who resisted the assumption that

disclosure was necessary for authenticity. Their families were not described as overtly dangerous, but the participants did not believe that parents or relatives were automatically entitled to information about their sexuality or gender. They differentiated concealment imposed by fear from privacy chosen through personal boundaries. Their online participation was similarly selective. They did not seek broad visibility and preferred limited networks in which identity was relevant to the relationship. This configuration complicated conventional coming-out narratives by demonstrating that nondisclosure could reflect autonomy, cultural sensitivity, or resistance to the demand that marginalized people make their identities publicly available. Across all five configurations, participants moved between

positions as their circumstances changed. A participant initially classified within contained visibility could later begin selective bridging after gaining financial independence, while a participant with integrated family relationships could become more cautious following online harassment or changes in the broader political environment. The configurations therefore represented dominant narrative patterns at the time of data collection rather than permanent outcomes. Collectively, they showed that family belonging and digital visibility were mutually influential. Family conditions shaped how participants used online spaces, while online relationships altered how participants understood, challenged, preserved, or reconstructed family belonging.

Table 3

Functions, Forms, and Limitations of Online Social Support Reported by Participants

Online support domain	Participants represented	Common forms of digital engagement	Reported contribution to participants' experiences	Principal limitations or risks
Identity language and self-recognition	22	Videos, forums, educational posts, personal narratives, identity-focused pages, and search-based exploration	Helped participants name feelings, distinguish sexual orientation from gender identity, reinterpret earlier experiences, and reduce perceptions of being uniquely different	Misinformation, rigid labeling, pressure to define identity prematurely, and confusion caused by conflicting content
Emotional validation and normalization	21	Peer responses, private messages, group discussions, comments, and shared personal stories	Reduced isolation, confirmed that family conflict was understandable, and offered recognition unavailable in participants' households	Dependence on inconsistent responses, emotional overexposure, invalidation, and comparison with idealized narratives
Practical advice and disclosure planning	18	Advice forums, moderated groups, direct messages, resource sharing, and discussion of family reactions	Supported risk assessment, preparation for disclosure, digital safety planning, access to services, and development of boundaries	Advice was not always culturally appropriate, professionally informed, or applicable to participants' material circumstances
Chosen-family relationships and sustained connection	16	Private group chats, gaming communities, closed servers, mutual-aid networks, and long-term online friendships	Created continuity, reciprocal care, celebration of identity milestones, and family-like relationships extending beyond single supportive interactions	Geographic distance, sudden disappearance of contacts, conflict within groups, unclear relational boundaries, and difficulty verifying identity
Crisis buffering and immediate assistance	11	Late-night messaging, peer check-ins, crisis-resource sharing, emergency housing information, and mutual aid	Provided emotional stabilization during family conflict, threats of outing, housing insecurity, and periods of acute distress	Peers sometimes assumed responsibilities beyond their capacity, and urgent support was not always available or clinically appropriate
Cultural and intersectional recognition	12	Identity-specific groups for racialized, immigrant, religious, disabled, transgender, and rural LGBTQ+ people	Allowed participants to discuss tensions between sexuality, gender, culture, faith, disability, migration, and family obligation without separating these experiences	Small communities increased identification risks, and some spaces reproduced racial, gender, class, or religious hierarchies
Privacy, surveillance, and involuntary disclosure risk	14	Pseudonymous accounts, restricted profiles, deleted histories, coded language, separate devices, and audience controls	Privacy practices enabled participation while reducing the likelihood of family discovery	Shared devices, synchronized accounts, screenshots, algorithmic recommendations, contact suggestions, and platform data practices could expose participants
Harassment and exclusion within LGBTQ+ spaces	13	Public posting, dating applications, comment sections, large groups, and identity-based debates	Negative encounters sometimes strengthened participants' boundaries and encouraged movement toward smaller moderated communities	Racism, transphobia, biphobia, misogyny, body shaming, ableism, sexual objectification, and gatekeeping undermined belonging
Visibility pressure and algorithmic comparison	9	Highly curated profiles, influencer content, coming-out stories, transition timelines, and engagement-driven feeds	Public narratives could offer hope and future possibilities	Participants felt pressure to disclose, appear confident, follow idealized identity trajectories, or measure themselves against highly visible users

As shown in Table 3, online social support was multidimensional and included informational, emotional, relational, practical, cultural, and crisis-oriented functions. The most widely reported function was access to identity language and opportunities for self-recognition. Twenty-two participants indicated that online content gave them concepts that were unavailable or actively suppressed in their families, schools, religious communities, or local environments. Participants frequently described an initial period in which they recognized that their feelings did not fit heterosexual or cisgender expectations but lacked the language required to interpret those feelings. Personal videos, discussion forums, educational pages, and digital storytelling enabled them to compare experiences and develop more precise understandings of attraction, gender expression, dysphoria, fluidity, and identity uncertainty. This process often altered the meaning of earlier memories. Experiences that had previously been interpreted as personal failure, social awkwardness, or inability to meet family expectations were later understood as connected to sexual or gender identity. However, identity language could also create pressure. Some participants felt compelled to adopt a definitive label before they were ready, while others encountered rigid claims about which experiences qualified as bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, lesbian, gay, or queer. Conflicting information sometimes intensified uncertainty rather than resolving it. Emotional validation was reported by 21 participants and was closely connected to the reduction of isolation. Participants described online responses as meaningful because they came from individuals who understood the emotional complexity of loving family members while fearing their reactions. This support differed from generic reassurance. It validated contradictory feelings, including loyalty and anger, gratitude and resentment, desire for disclosure and desire for privacy, or relief after leaving home accompanied by grief about separation. Participants also benefited from seeing other LGBTQ+ people describe culturally similar conflicts. Such narratives reduced the belief that difficulty with family belonging reflected individual weakness. Nevertheless, emotional support remained vulnerable to inconsistency. Posts could receive no response, supportive contacts could disappear, and participants could encounter dismissive statements suggesting that they should immediately leave their families or disclose regardless of consequences. These reactions were particularly alienating for participants who were financially dependent, attached to their cultures, responsible for younger siblings, or unwilling to abandon relationships that

remained meaningful despite conflict. Practical advice and disclosure planning were identified in 18 narratives. Participants used online communities to assess whether disclosure was safe, prepare alternative housing, gather legal or health information, create digital-security plans, and anticipate questions from relatives. Advice was particularly valuable when it addressed concrete issues, such as how to remove identifying notifications, locate LGBTQ+-affirming healthcare, discuss pronouns with family members, or respond to religious objections. Some participants developed staged disclosure plans after consulting peers, beginning with the relative most likely to respond supportively and delaying disclosure to those associated with greater material or emotional risk. However, advice produced in predominantly White, urban, financially independent, or Western individualist contexts was not always applicable to participants from immigrant or collectivist families. Recommendations to sever contact, insist on immediate recognition, or prioritize individual expression over family continuity sometimes failed to account for cultural obligations and economic dependence. Sixteen participants described relationships that extended beyond temporary information exchange and came to resemble chosen family. These ties developed through private group chats, gaming communities, moderated servers, fandom spaces, and long-term direct messaging. Participants celebrated birthdays, relationship milestones, name changes, medical transitions, graduations, and first experiences of disclosure with online friends. Reciprocal care distinguished these relationships from passive consumption of supportive content. Participants checked on one another after family conflicts, provided companionship during holidays, and maintained routines of daily or weekly communication. For those excluded from family rituals, online gatherings created alternative experiences of celebration and recognition. Yet digitally mediated chosen family had limitations. Geographic distance reduced the availability of physical assistance, relationships could end suddenly when accounts were deleted, and uncertainty about identity or intention could complicate trust. Conflict within small communities could also be particularly disruptive because participants risked losing several relationships simultaneously. Crisis buffering was reported by 11 participants, especially those who experienced acute family conflict, threats of exposure, housing instability, or severe emotional distress. Online peers provided immediate contact during late-night crises, shared information about shelters and community services, and helped participants identify safer places to stay. In

several accounts, the speed of online communication was crucial because local family or community members could not be approached safely. At the same time, participants recognized that peers were not substitutes for professional crisis services. Some online contacts assumed emotionally demanding roles without appropriate training, and support was not always available when needed. Cultural and intersectional recognition emerged in 12 narratives. Participants emphasized that general LGBTQ+ spaces did not always understand the interaction of sexuality or gender with race, migration, religion, disability, and family obligation. Smaller groups organized around intersecting identities allowed them to discuss culturally specific experiences, including pressure to marry, responsibility for family reputation, religious guilt, racism in dating, expectations of gender conformity, and fear of losing connection to ethnic communities. These spaces made it possible to challenge the assumption that participants had to choose between LGBTQ+ identity and cultural belonging. However, the small size of intersectional communities generated confidentiality concerns, particularly when participants feared encountering acquaintances or relatives. Online spaces could also reproduce the same hierarchies participants encountered elsewhere. Thirteen participants reported racism, transphobia, biphobia, misogyny, ableism, class-based exclusion, body shaming, sexual objectification, or identity gatekeeping within LGBTQ+ digital environments. Bisexual participants described having their identities dismissed as temporary or indecisive, transgender and nonbinary participants encountered scrutiny concerning appearance and medical transition, and racialized participants reported being stereotyped or excluded from dominant representations of LGBTQ+ life. These experiences weakened the idea that shared minority status automatically produced solidarity. Participants often responded by leaving large public spaces and moving toward smaller, moderated, or invitation-based communities. Privacy and involuntary disclosure were major concerns for 14 participants. Although pseudonyms, separate accounts, private browsing, and audience controls increased access to support, platform design could undermine these strategies. Contact-suggestion systems, synchronized devices, shared family accounts, automatically displayed notifications, screenshots, location information, and algorithmic recommendations created pathways through which LGBTQ+-related activity could become visible. Participants understood that privacy was not solely an individual responsibility because platforms could connect social

networks in ways users did not anticipate. Nine participants also discussed visibility pressure generated by highly curated online narratives. Coming-out videos, public transition timelines, relationship content, and confident identity advocacy could offer hope, but they also established idealized standards. Participants sometimes felt that they were insufficiently proud, open, politically active, physically attractive, or certain of their identities. Those who remained concealed could interpret public visibility as evidence that they were failing to live authentically. Over time, many participants developed more critical digital practices by curating feeds, unfollowing distressing accounts, limiting exposure to hostile discussions, and choosing communities that accepted uncertainty and privacy. Overall, online social support did not simply compensate for family rejection. It expanded the range of relationships, language, and strategies through which participants negotiated belonging. Its value depended on platform safety, cultural relevance, relational continuity, moderation practices, and participants' ability to control the connection between digital and offline identities. The findings therefore portray digital environments as simultaneously enabling and risky: they made participants visible to themselves and to supportive others, while also creating new forms of surveillance, comparison, exclusion, and vulnerability.

4 Discussion

The present study explored how LGBTQ+ young adults in Canada negotiated family belonging, cultural norms, identity concealment, digital visibility, and online social support. The findings demonstrated that participants' experiences could not be adequately represented through binary distinctions such as accepted versus rejected, open versus concealed, or connected versus isolated. Instead, family belonging emerged as conditional, relational, and continuously renegotiated. Many participants remained emotionally attached to their families and valued the material, cultural, and interpersonal support available within the household, yet they simultaneously understood that full expression of their sexual orientation or gender identity could threaten those relationships. This pattern supports social-ecological accounts of LGBTQ+ belonging, which conceptualize belonging as an outcome of interactions among individual identity, close relationships, community settings, institutional environments, and wider cultural norms (Matsick et al., 2024b). The findings also correspond with the social-ecological model of LGBTQ+ people's

belonging, according to which recognition within one setting does not necessarily compensate for exclusion in another (Matsick et al., 2024a). Participants could feel recognized by online peers while remaining invisible to parents, or accepted by immediate family members while continuing to conceal themselves from extended relatives, religious communities, or ethnocultural networks. Belonging was therefore neither a stable personal possession nor a single relational outcome; it was a context-dependent experience that changed according to the audience, perceived risk, and degree of control participants had over their visibility.

Conditional family belonging was the most pervasive theme and reflected the coexistence of affection and restriction within participants' family relationships. Many participants did not describe their families as wholly rejecting. Rather, they experienced care, financial support, participation in family rituals, and emotional attachment alongside silence, denial, gender regulation, or expectations of heterosexual marriage. This finding is consistent with research showing that LGBTQ+ young adults may remain deeply invested in family relationships even when rejection has caused emotional harm or disrupted their sense of home (DeChants et al., 2022). It also aligns with evidence that queer and family identities can become compartmentalized when young people perceive that the expression of one identity threatens the continuity of the other (Jones et al., 2024). Participants' descriptions of being loved but not fully known further resemble accounts of cherished family relationships in which difficult or identity-related truths remain unspoken (Goldberg et al., 2023). Such patterns indicate that family rejection should not be understood only through explicit hostility. Avoidance, selective recognition, refusal to discuss identity, and support that remains private or conditional can also prevent young adults from experiencing full relational membership. The present findings extend previous work by demonstrating that partial acceptance may preserve contact while simultaneously institutionalizing silence. Participants often adjusted their expectations and treated limited recognition from particular relatives as meaningful, even when broader family norms remained unchanged.

Cultural values were central to the interpretation of both family belonging and disclosure. Participants from immigrant, racialized, religious, or collectivist family contexts frequently understood identity expression as an issue affecting family reputation, intergenerational responsibility, and community relationships rather than merely personal authenticity. This result accords with

research showing that cultural values influence how caregivers respond to LGBTQ+ family members and how those responses affect mental health (Abreu et al., 2025). It also reflects findings among Filipino queer young adults, for whom parental acceptance and connection to LGBTQ+ communities were associated with openness about identity (Marquez et al., 2024). The participants' narratives similarly support research indicating that Vietnamese LGBTQ+ young people exercise agency within culturally embedded family relationships rather than through complete separation from them (Mai, 2023). Their strategies also resonate with multicultural accounts of resilience in which identity development is negotiated through family obligation, social norms, and culturally specific understandings of respect (Lam-Nguyen, 2025). For some participants, nondisclosure represented concern for parents, protection of siblings, avoidance of community stigma, or preservation of access to cultural and religious spaces. These findings reinforce critiques of the closet as a universal metaphor. Among queer South Asian women, concealment has been shown to involve gendered, racialized, and familial obligations that cannot be reduced to individual fear or shame (Patel, 2025). Similarly, research involving Arab-Palestinian gay men illustrates how overlapping minority positions shape the costs of both visibility and concealment (Postan-Aizik & Aboud-Halabi, 2026). The present study therefore suggests that culturally responsive interpretations of disclosure must distinguish imposed silence from deliberate privacy and recognize that openness may have collective consequences extending beyond the individual.

Concealment emerged as a demanding form of relational and emotional labor. Participants described modifying language, changing pronouns, hiding relationships, managing clothing and gender presentation, deleting digital traces, and monitoring family members' access to devices and accounts. This result supports evidence that LGBTQ+ disclosure is a dynamic process influenced by safety, relational closeness, context, and anticipated reactions rather than a single developmental milestone (Mousavi et al., 2024). It is also consistent with reviews describing coming out as a repeated and situational process across different social environments (Sahoo et al., 2023). The participants' accounts showed that concealment could preserve housing, financial support, cultural membership, and family contact, but this protection came at the cost of vigilance, exhaustion, and fragmented self-presentation. These psychological consequences align with evidence that concealment and low parental support can contribute to suicidality among bisexual

youth (Reyes et al., 2022). The dynamic relationship between parental attitudes and mental well-being identified among Chinese LGBTQ+ young adults also corresponds with participants' descriptions of fluctuating distress following supportive, dismissive, or ambiguous family interactions (Wang et al., 2024). Importantly, concealment was not uniformly described as pathological. Some participants framed nondisclosure as a boundary, a temporary strategy, or a refusal to provide intimate information to relatives who had not demonstrated trustworthiness. The reclaimed-privacy configuration therefore challenges developmental models in which complete disclosure is treated as the inevitable endpoint of healthy identity formation.

The cross-case configurations demonstrated that participants managed family belonging and visibility through distinct but changeable patterns. Those characterized by contained visibility maintained a clear division between their family-facing and digitally expressed identities. Participants in the selective-bridging configuration used trusted relatives and online peers to test whether family relationships could accommodate greater openness. Those experiencing fractured belonging relied on digital communities to reconstruct care, security, and kinship after serious rejection or relational rupture. Participants with integrated but vigilant identities experienced acceptance in their immediate families while remaining cautious in other settings, whereas those emphasizing reclaimed privacy rejected the assumption that relatives were entitled to disclosure. These patterns are consistent with international findings showing that LGBTQ+ young adults residing with parents can display different psychological adjustment profiles according to family climate, identity expression, and available support (Vázquez et al., 2023). They also align with reports from LGBTQ+ college students whose identities became difficult to express after returning to family homes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hanna-Walker et al., 2023). Observations from gender-sexuality alliances similarly show that losing access to affirming peer spaces can intensify isolation when home environments are restrictive (Baerwolf, 2023). The present configurations extend this literature by showing that young adults do not merely respond to supportive or unsupportive environments; they actively create differentiated relational arrangements, control the movement of information, and revise disclosure strategies as their material and interpersonal circumstances change.

Material dependence was especially important in explaining why some participants maintained concealment. Those living with family members or relying on relatives for tuition, housing, transportation, or immigration-related support perceived disclosure as carrying consequences beyond emotional disapproval. This finding is consistent with research on nonbinary young adults navigating housing precarity, which demonstrates that insecure housing can constrain identity expression and increase dependence on unsafe or unsupportive living arrangements (Flood & Hochstenbach, 2024). The experiences of undocumented queer emerging adults likewise show how identity, legal vulnerability, economic dependence, and family relationships can become inseparable (Bogdan, 2025). Research on transnational sexualities further suggests that family expectations, migration, and sexuality influence whether LGBTQ+ adults remain in shared households, live independently, or establish alternative living arrangements (Ghosh, 2024). The findings also revealed that disability and caregiving dependence could limit privacy and access to community, corresponding with evidence that queer and disabled individuals face intersecting barriers to autonomy, recognition, and support (Kempapidis et al., 2023). These results underscore that disclosure choices must be interpreted within material contexts. Advising young adults to disclose or leave a rejecting family without considering housing, income, disability, legal status, and cultural connection may underestimate the risks involved and impose an individualistic model of identity management.

Digital environments played a central role in identity recognition and narrative development. Nearly all participants described encountering LGBTQ+-related language, stories, or communities online before they could discuss these experiences safely in their families. Digital spaces enabled participants to observe others anonymously, compare experiences, experiment with identity labels, and reinterpret earlier feelings. This pattern is consistent with research showing that social media provides young gay men with multiple strategies for controlling the timing, audience, and form of coming out (Jerome & Ahmad Junaidi bin Ahmad, 2022). It also supports findings that inclusive information and affirming support are critical during LGBTQ+ young people's self-discovery and recovery from emotional distress (Pensuksan et al., 2025). For participants whose formal education had offered little or no LGBTQ+-inclusive content, online media also compensated for gaps in sexuality and relationship education. This observation accords with arguments that inclusive sexuality education

should recognize diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, relationships, and developmental needs rather than reproducing heterosexual and cisgender assumptions (Eleuteri et al., 2024). Digital narratives did more than provide information; they supplied interpretive frameworks through which participants could understand family conflict, cultural pressure, attraction, gender expression, dysphoria, and identity fluidity. By encountering stories from others, participants were able to reconstruct past events and imagine futures that were not represented within their immediate environments.

Online social support also functioned as an important mechanism of emotional validation, practical assistance, and chosen kinship. Participants reported that online peers normalized contradictory feelings about family, offered disclosure advice, provided information about healthcare and housing, and maintained contact during periods of conflict or isolation. These results align with research showing that queer young adults use community connection, identity affirmation, problem solving, and meaning-making as coping strategies for minority stress (Xu et al., 2024). They also support evidence that social belonging depends on stable recognition, meaningful participation, and continuity of supportive relationships (Critchlow et al., 2026). In the present study, digital chosen families were particularly meaningful for participants whose families of origin refused to acknowledge their identities. Online friends celebrated names, pronouns, relationships, transitions, and personal milestones that could not be shared at home. For participants who experienced fractured belonging, these relationships provided a basis for reconstructing family-like care. This process resembles the use of creativity, self-definition, and community among trans young adults of color as resources for reclaiming identity and agency (Pease et al., 2024). It is also compatible with findings that Black LGBTQ+ young adults may respond to marginalization through identity-based community engagement and intersectional activism (Shaheed et al., 2022). Nevertheless, participants did not view chosen family as a simple substitute for family of origin. Digital relationships reduced isolation but did not erase grief, attachment, cultural loss, or hopes for future reconciliation.

The findings further showed that online environments reproduced many of the exclusions found offline. Participants reported racism, transphobia, biphobia, ableism, body-based judgment, misogyny, sexual objectification, and gatekeeping within LGBTQ+ spaces. This finding supports evidence that LGBTQ+ people of color often encounter

systems of care and support that fail to respond adequately to intersecting identities and culturally specific experiences (Ito et al., 2025). It also aligns with the broader conclusion that social exclusion can operate through multiple neuropsychological, relational, and structural pathways (Kaprinis & Charalampakis, 2025). Participants' exposure to overlapping forms of rejection and discrimination resembles latent patterns of multiple minority stressors identified among LGBTQ+ young adults (Shrader et al., 2024). The association between conflict, nonacceptance, discrimination, and poorer mental well-being documented in previous research also supports the distress participants attributed to simultaneous family and online exclusion (Toh et al., 2023). These findings complicate idealized representations of the internet as an inherently liberating space. Shared LGBTQ+ identity did not automatically produce solidarity, and large public platforms were often less supportive than smaller, moderated, or identity-specific communities.

Privacy risks were another important limitation of digital support. Participants used pseudonyms, separate accounts, restricted audiences, deleted histories, and coded language to prevent involuntary disclosure, yet platform features could undermine these strategies. Contact recommendations, synchronized devices, shared accounts, algorithmic content, notification previews, and screenshots created possibilities for unintended visibility. Thus, the same technologies that enabled identity exploration could expose participants to family surveillance or outing. The findings demonstrate that digital concealment requires labor similar to offline concealment and that platform design can redistribute control over disclosure away from users. Participants also described pressure generated by public coming-out narratives, transition timelines, and highly visible LGBTQ+ influencers. Although such content provided hope, it sometimes implied that authenticity required confidence, certainty, activism, or complete openness. This pressure was especially difficult for participants who remained dependent on family members or who valued privacy. The results therefore support broader developmental perspectives emphasizing that LGBTQ+ well-being depends on affirming contexts and structural protections, not merely on an individual's willingness to be visible (Russell & Dorri, 2023). They also correspond with socio-ecological research showing that suicidality and psychological distress are influenced by interacting family, peer, institutional, and societal conditions even in countries characterized by relatively high LGBTQ+ acceptance (Wallace et al., 2024).

5 Conclusion

Taken together, the findings suggest that visibility should be understood as calibrated access rather than as a linear movement from concealment to disclosure. Participants made deliberate decisions about who could know which aspects of their identity, in what setting, and under what conditions. Their strategies changed as they moved away from home, gained financial independence, formed relationships, entered employment, accessed healthcare, or encountered shifts in family attitudes. Family belonging and digital belonging were mutually influential: family restriction increased the importance of online communities, while online recognition gave participants language and confidence to reinterpret or renegotiate family relationships. At the same time, online support could strengthen a decision to remain private rather than encouraging disclosure. This finding is important because it shifts the focus from whether young adults are “out” to whether they possess meaningful control over identity information and have access to relationships in which they can be recognized safely. The study therefore contributes to an understanding of LGBTQ+ belonging as a negotiated arrangement involving attachment, culture, material security, privacy, and selective visibility rather than a singular achievement of openness.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The qualitative sample of 24 participants was designed to generate detailed and diverse narratives rather than statistically representative estimates, and the results should not be generalized to all LGBTQ+ young adults in Canada. Recruitment through community organizations, educational institutions, and online networks may have favored individuals who were already connected to LGBTQ+ resources or comfortable discussing identity in a research setting. Young adults experiencing severe digital exclusion, limited internet access, acute family surveillance, language barriers, homelessness, or complete disconnection from LGBTQ+ communities may have been underrepresented. The interviews were conducted in English, which may have limited participation among young adults who primarily communicate in French, Indigenous languages, or immigrant family languages. The use of retrospective narratives also means that participants’ accounts were shaped by memory and by their present interpretations of earlier events. Although the digital narrative maps and participant-selected artifacts enriched the accounts, the study did not directly observe family interactions or online

communities and therefore relied on participants’ descriptions. In addition, combining diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, cultural backgrounds, and family contexts within one analysis may have obscured experiences specific to smaller subgroups. Finally, the cross-sectional design captured participants’ dominant narrative positions at one point in time and could not directly document how family relationships, concealment strategies, and digital practices evolved over longer periods.

Future research should examine these processes longitudinally to identify how family belonging, disclosure, concealment, and online participation change as young adults gain financial independence, relocate, establish intimate partnerships, begin gender-affirming care, or reconnect with relatives. Studies should include larger and more specifically defined groups, including transgender and nonbinary young adults, bisexual individuals, Two-Spirit and Indigenous participants, racialized immigrants, refugees, disabled LGBTQ+ people, rural residents, Francophone communities, and young adults without stable housing or reliable internet access. Comparative research across provinces, cultural communities, and national contexts could clarify how legal protections, housing markets, religious institutions, healthcare systems, and platform regulations influence identity management. Family-based studies involving parents, siblings, and extended relatives could also examine how silence and selective acceptance are produced across relationships rather than solely from the perspective of young adults. Future digital research should investigate how recommendation algorithms, contact synchronization, artificial intelligence moderation, identity verification, and commercial data practices affect the risk of involuntary disclosure. Participatory designs that involve LGBTQ+ young adults in defining research questions, interpreting findings, and designing digital-safety interventions would help ensure that future scholarship reflects the priorities of those most directly affected.

Practitioners should avoid treating disclosure as the universal measure of identity health or authenticity. Counselors, educators, healthcare providers, social workers, and community organizations should help LGBTQ+ young adults assess emotional, cultural, financial, residential, and digital risks before making disclosure decisions. Support should validate both the desire for openness and the decision to maintain privacy, while distinguishing self-determined boundaries from concealment imposed through coercion or fear. Services should include culturally responsive family

counseling, practical housing and financial planning, digital-safety education, and access to moderated peer-support communities. Professionals should also recognize that family relationships may contain affection and harm simultaneously and should not pressure young adults either to preserve family contact or to sever it. Schools and universities should provide inclusive sexuality education, confidential counseling, safe communication channels, and identity-affirming spaces that remain accessible to students living in restrictive homes. Digital platforms and community moderators should strengthen privacy controls, reduce unwanted contact recommendations, respond consistently to harassment, and design spaces that account for racism, transphobia, biphobia, ableism, and cultural exclusion. Practice should ultimately prioritize young adults' control over identity information, their material safety, and their ability to construct multiple forms of belonging without requiring them to sacrifice family, culture, privacy, or personal integrity.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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