

A qualitative exploration of how LGBTQ+ immigrants cope with managing visibility across cultures

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Abstract

Previous research has described the experiences of forced migrants as traumatic and has highlighted the reasons why Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) individuals would seek asylum from persecution. Reasons for LGBTQ+ populations being forced to seek asylum have included facing discrimination, harassment, prolonged psychological distress, and immediate threats of violence in their country of origin. The current study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate the lived experiences of five LGBTQ+ migrants who are out of the closet in their current countries of residence while remaining closeted in their countries of origin. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed five superordinate themes: *Navigating Restrictive Environments in Country of Origin*, *Embodied Impact of Closeting*, *Labour of Secrecy and Identity as Performance*, *Immigration and Coming Out as Freedom*, and *Integrating Past and Present Across Borders*. Limitations included broad inclusion criteria, lack of diversity in the sample, and a small sample. Limitations are addressed, and recommendations for future research are discussed, including the exploration of the lived experiences of individuals who would consider themselves to be “out” in countries where it is illegal to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: Qualitative; LGBTQ+ Immigrants; Social Constructivist; Belonging; Closeting

1. Introduction (Global Contexts of Queer Identities and Migration)

Globally, the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) individuals are shaped by the sociocultural, political, religious, and legal contexts they navigate. In over 60 countries, same-sex relationships are criminalised, with some imposing imprisonment or even death for consensual same-sex intimacy (BBC, 2023; ILGA, 2026). Such environments cultivate fear and shame, compelling many LGBTQ+ individuals to conceal their identities (Camacho et al., 2020; Cochran & Mays, 2009; Meyer, 2003). Conversely, many other nations have introduced progressive legislation and shifting cultural norms that promote greater acceptance and legal protection for those in the queer community (Flynn et al., 2024; Suppes et al., 2021). This disparity leads to complex migratory patterns as LGBTQ+ individuals seek refuge and belonging. For some, migration represents escape from oppression, for others, it introduces new challenges of integration, racism, continued homophobic sentiment, or cultural dissonance. Central to these psychological and sociocultural tensions is the decision to disclose or to conceal identity based on perceived safety.

1.1. The Closet and Contextual Identity Management

The concepts of being “closeted” and “out of the closet” are therefore pivotal in understanding LGBTQ+ experiences across cultures. Sedgwick’s (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet* conceptualised the closet as a metaphorical space of concealment and silence surrounding non-heteronormative identities. Being “closeted” is defined as withholding or

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disguising one's sexual or gender identity, while being "out of the closet" denotes open self-disclosure and authenticity. In life, these are fluid, context-dependent positions shaped by sociocultural and relational dynamics. Nonetheless, on a more political militant level, the whole concept of 'coming out' represents a form of social blackmail, whereby individuals must position themselves in alterity to render themselves visible and intelligible within a cisheteropatriarchal normative system (Carretero-Resino, 2023).

Concealment is often psychologically taxing. Pachankis (2007) described the "psychological burden of the closet" as a continuous effort involving vigilance and fear of discovery. Concealment can generate anxiety and shame, while openness, though often associated with improved wellbeing, can entail risk in unsupportive or dangerous environments (Beals et al., 2009). The duality between authenticity and safety frames much of the existing psychological literature on LGBTQ+ immigration.

These frameworks have helped conceptualise concealment as a stressor, however, they can sometimes treat being closeted as a stable condition situated within a single sociocultural setting. There is limited engagement with how the closet operates transnationally, particularly for individuals who move between affirming and non-affirming geographical locations freely. The binary framing of closeted versus out may, therefore, obscure the lived complexity of immigrants who inhabit both positions throughout their lives depending on region. Paradoxically, some countries where LGBTQ+ individuals migrate to and settle in due to greater freedom and protection, happen to be former colonial powers that introduced certain homophobic rules, legislation and cultural (religious) norms that have subsequently been used to prosecute and marginalise gender/sexual variant people (Jormanainen, 2023; FIDH, 2025).

1.2. Forced Migration and Identity Stress Frameworks

Existing research on LGBTQ+ migration has primarily focused on individuals who were forced to seek asylum or refugee status due to threats of persecution in their countries of origin. Gottvall et al. (2022), for example, examined post-migration psychological experiences among LGBTQ+ forced migrants. Through meta-analysis of existing qualitative studies, findings identified themes of psychological distress, resilience, trauma, and intersectional marginalisation. Although participants often reported a sense of liberation after migration, many continued to experience internalised stigma and social isolation in their new countries of residence. The findings were framed through minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), highlighting that while migration may remove external threats, the internalised effects of prolonged concealment and fear persist throughout the relocation process.

Minority stress theory highlights the psychological toll of closeting. It proposes that, due to external prejudice and internalised stigma, minority groups experience chronic, identity-related stress (Meyer, 2003). For LGBTQ+ individuals, the ongoing pressure to conform, combined with anticipated rejection or violence, creates continuous psychological strain. This stress has been linked to elevated rates of substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and suicidality among queer populations (Meyer, 2003). The cumulative effects of this stress can result in lasting trauma that can be arduous to undo (Baams et al., 2015).

Although minority stress theory has provided an important explanatory framework for understanding psychological distress and mechanisms of harm, it is often applied as though immigration culminates in a stable host environment. The theory does not sufficiently account for individuals who repeatedly re-enter environments high in stigma through travel and sustained transnational ties. As a result, the cyclical reactivation of minority stress across borders remains conceptually underexplored in the existing literature.

1.3. Stigma, Identity Disruption, and Post-Migration Adjustment

The concept of stigma is also central to understanding the experiences of queer immigrants who conceal their identities in their countries of origin. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as a socially constructed process where certain attributes are marked as undesirable, resulting in marginalisation and the classification of a person as tainted. For the LGBTQ+ immigrant community, stigma operates on multiple levels. External stigma includes societal prejudice and structural discrimination, anticipated stigma is expectations of rejection or harm, and internalised stigma where individuals take on negative societal messaging and direct it inward (Jackson et al., 2023; Rostosky et al., 202; Yu et al., 2021). Growing up in environments where same-sex relationships or gender diversity were pathologised can embed stigma into identity and embodied habits, such as constant vigilance. Migration to a more queer-affirming country may reduce external stigma, yet the literature shows that internalised stigma persists even after external threats diminish. This is particularly relevant for individuals who live "double lives" across countries, as returning to their countries of origin may reactivate earlier harm and retraumatise them, even when their new environment affirms their identity (Griffing et al., 2005).

In Sweden, LGBTQ+ immigrants also experienced loneliness and identity fragmentation. Kostenius et al. (2021) explored these lived experiences, with participants describing migration as a transition from “hell to heaven”, signifying a shift from repression to emancipation. The study also revealed ambivalence for some participants, who continued to struggle with belonging. Drawing on identity process theory (Bardi et al., 2014; Breakwell, 1986), the authors highlighted how the need for continuity within identity construction was disrupted by displacement and new cultural values. While Sweden offered greater legal protection, the participants’ physical liberation was not always paired with psychological liberation. The findings underscored the importance of social connectedness and community approval in sustaining mental health among LGBTQ+ immigrants.

However, studies such as Kostenius et al. (2021) remain situated within a permanent resettlement framework, implicitly portraying migration as a one-way rupture always followed by adaptation and a long, uninterrupted road to repair. This positioning overlooks immigrants who sustain active ties to their country of origin through frequent visits. In such cases, identity disruption may stem not solely from displacement, but from the continual negotiation of dual identities and different cultural expectations across national contexts.

Additional research has further illustrated the lasting harm closeting can cause across borders. Attia et al. (2022) explored the pre- and post-migration experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Participants described pre-migration lives characterised by secrecy and fear, and post-migration lives marked by ambivalence and mistrust. Even within “safer” environments, many struggled to internalise safety and authenticity, suggesting that hypervigilance and self-concealment had become habitual regardless of cultural context. Findings suggested that internalised stigma and expectations of rejection remained long after physical persecution ended. Their work argued that closeting operated as a learned survival strategy to be unlearned in safer contexts otherwise it could lead to chronic stress and impaired relationships long-term.

Yet, by centring asylum seekers who experienced persecution, this work risks equating concealment only with extreme trauma. Less attention has been afforded to those who conceal because of relational obligations, cultural loyalty, or fear of social exclusion and not due to immediate threats of physical violence. As important as telling survivor stories of persecuted LGBTQ+ asylum seekers is, the spotlight on trauma and violence may inadvertently marginalise more nuanced transnational experiences of concealment that do not align with the prevailing persecution narrative.

1.4. Psychodynamic and Trauma Perspectives on Concealment

Winnicott’s (1965) concept of the True Self and False Self is especially relevant in regard to closeting. For Winnicott (1965), the True Self represents an individual’s authentic core, while the False Self develops as a defensive response to environmental threats to the expression of the True Self. When young LGBTQ+ people learn that their authentic attractions or gender identities are unacceptable, they may develop a False Self that presents as heterosexual to protect themselves from unaccepting families or communities. Although this defensive mask may offer immediate protection, it may cause psychological hurdles that do not disappear merely by the crossing of a border (Winnicott, 1965).

The traumatic consequences of persecution due to sexual orientation or gender identity were also central to Lasowski et al.’s (2023) study, which investigated LGBTQ+ asylum seekers migration experiences through the lens of trauma. Participants reported long-term psychological effects of forced concealment, including intrusive memories and emotional numbing. Additionally, while migration provided physical safety, it did not guarantee psychological safety, as many participants remained haunted by violence and rejection. Concealment itself was described as a form of trauma, supporting the idea that prolonged denial of the authentic self could create lasting internalised stigma. Their findings align with other literature highlighting how closeting functions as a chronic stressor linked to depression and anxiety (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Although trauma-informed and psychodynamic approaches deepen understanding of internal conflict, they continue to conceptualise concealment predominantly as a historical injury rather than an ongoing, context-responsive strategy that may be continuously psychologically harmful. For transnationally mobile individuals, concealment may be repeatedly activated and deactivated according to location, suggesting a fluidity that extends beyond the scope of these trauma models currently.

1.5. Limitations in the Current Literature

While these studies highlight the psychological consequences of closeting and the complex nature of post-migration adjustment periods, they also contain limitations. First, each focuses on asylum seekers or forced migrants, making it difficult to generalise findings to LGBTQ+ individuals who migrate voluntarily and remain closeted in their country of origin. Gottvall et al. (2022) emphasised resilience, Kostenius et al. (2021) highlighted the search for belonging, Attia et

al. (2022) explored persistent hypervigilance, and Lasowski et al. (2023) investigated trauma with long-term health implications. Yet, all four centred heavily on persecution and threats of violence. This emphasis risks reinforcing stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ immigrant community as solely traumatised, potentially obscuring those whose migration is motivated by factors other than imminent danger, or further stigmatising asylum seekers. Additionally, many of these studies applied broad theoretical frameworks to their findings, yet offered limited exploration of how cultural norms, family dynamics, or transnational identities uniquely shape closeted immigrants' experiences. Together, these limitations highlight the need for research beyond the context of asylum that explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants who navigate dual identities across borders, remaining closeted in one cultural environment while experiencing liberation in another.

1.6. Voluntary and Semi-Voluntary Migration: Emerging Insights

Even with much of the literature concentrating on asylum and forced migration, other studies have begun exploring voluntary or semi-voluntary migration. Cheung et al. (2023) examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ migrants in South Africa, a country that legally protects sexual minority rights yet remains socially divided on the topic. Participants expressed both hope rooted in newfound freedom and disillusionment stemming from racism, economic hardship, trauma, and stigma. The researchers conceptualised hope as a psychological coping mechanism within the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), suggesting that autonomy and authenticity are central to wellbeing but contingent on external validation. The findings highlight the paradox of immigration as liberation and loss, as individuals gain self-expression at the cost of cultural belonging.

Similarly, Haghiri-Vijeh and Clark (2022) explored stigma and mental health among LGBTQ+ migrants and identified ongoing barriers to psychological wellbeing after relocation. Participants described navigating intersecting stigmas such as sexuality, migration status, and ethnicity. The authors emphasised the persistence of anticipated stigma, which contributed to continued self-censorship and anxiety, particularly when interacting with family from their country of origin. This selective disclosure reflects the phenomenon of contextual identity management, where individuals adjust self-presentation to align with different cultural norms (Reyes et al., 2022; Tatum & Lent, 2024). The findings echo Winnicott's (1965) theory, as participants described emotional discomfort arising from acting in ways incongruent with their authentic True Selves.

While these studies acknowledge ongoing transnational ties, they do not examine the lives of individuals who physically and repeatedly traverse these differing national contexts. The emphasis remains on post-relocation adjustment rather than on the lived experience of switching between out and closeted selves across borders. As such, the literature alludes to contextual identity management but does not fully capture its often cyclical dimensions.

1.7. The Underexplored Experiences of Transnational and Cyclical Identity Management

Together, these studies reveal a consistent pattern, that concealment and disclosure are dynamic processes that shape the psychological experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants across cultural contexts. The literature suggests that while migration can reduce external stressors, it may simultaneously amplify internal conflicts around belonging and authenticity (Cheung et al., 2023; Haghiri-Vijeh & Clark, 2022). However, these insights have been derived almost exclusively from research on cisgendered gay men seeking asylum or permanent resettlement due to persecution. A significant gap remains concerning LGBTQ+ individuals with relative mobility who travel freely between countries and alternate between openness and concealment depending on location.

This gap is particularly significant given the global increase in mobility among professionals and students who often maintain transnational connections (Lértora et al., 2021; Werst & Million, 2025). Unlike asylum seekers, these individuals have the freedom to move across borders yet remain psychologically constrained by the need to manage incompatible social expectations and contrasting versions of the self. Psychological literature on deception and authenticity provide frameworks for understanding the stressors unique to this group. Kelly and Yip (2006) found that lying to loved ones, even for self-protection, can generate guilt and alienation among those inclined to keep secrets. Returning to the closet upon visiting family or one's country of origin may therefore reactivate earlier patterns of anxiety, shame, isolation, and self-surveillance, as individuals revert to the strategies they once relied on for safety (Grigoreva & Szaszko, 2024; Pachankis et al., 2020).

While the existing literature primarily conceptualises LGBTQ+ immigration as a linear trajectory from fear and repression to safety and freedom, many LGBTQ+ immigrants with transnational mobility experience migration as a cyclical process. They may live openly and authentically in one context while strategically concealing their identity in another to preserve belonging and safety. The psychological consequences of this cyclical experience remain underexplored.

1.8. The Current Study

Previous research described the experiences of forced migrants as traumatic and highlighted the reasons why LGBTQ+ individuals would seek asylum from persecution (Haghiri-Vijeh & Clark, 2022). Such reasons have included discrimination, harassment, prolonged psychological distress, and immediate threats of violence in their countries of origin (Attia et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2023; Gottvall et al., 2022; Kostenius et al., 2021). These studies, however, mainly focused on cisgender gay men and largely ignored experiences of the broader queer community, as well as LGBTQ+ immigrants who possess mobility and move freely between countries living “double lives” (Gottvall et al., 2022; Lasowski et al., 2023).

The existing gap in the literature inspired the present study which explored the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants managing visibility and secrecy across borders. The overarching research question was: *What are the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants being “out” abroad while remaining “closeted” in their home country?*

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Design

The design was qualitative, using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to better understand the lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008) of LGBTQ+ immigrants. Based in hermeneutics and phenomenology, and aligned with interpretivism, IPA explores how researchers and individuals co-construct subjective meaning (Eatough & Smith, 2007; Willig, 2001).

Qualitative methodology was selected as it is a theoretically grounded approach capable of producing in-depth and nuanced insight into complex identity negotiations that would lose meaning if reduced to numerical data points (Eatough & Smith, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Willig, 2001). IPA is particularly suited to examining lived experience in contexts where meaning is relational and culturally specific as it first allows for detailed case-by-case analysis then again for cross-case analysis through the interpretive lens of the researchers which enhances the analytical depth (Smith & Osborn, 2014). A qualitative approach and IPA specifically are especially suited to the current study, as they enabled an exploration of participants’ subjective lived experiences that remained sensitive to nuanced cultural differences between countries, allowing meaning to be understood within specific social and cultural contexts apart from predetermined restraints.

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience and purposive sampling. Five participants were interviewed as data saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Inclusion criteria were to be: over 18, fluent in English, not currently diagnosed with any mental health conditions or seeking treatment for any mental health conditions, identify as LGBTQ+, immigrants, and have experience navigating identity across different cultures. Limiting the sample to adults with LGBTQ+ and immigrant identities, maintained focus and met ethical and methodological expectations for IPA, which prioritises small, information-rich samples (Smith et al., 2009). By carefully selecting participants who shared key characteristics relevant to the research question, the study maintained clear focus and coherence. Saturation was considered reached when no new meaningful themes were emerging from the interviews, supporting the adequacy of the sample size (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

2.3. Epistemological Positioning

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge (Sol & Heng, 2022). The epistemological positioning of this study was Social Constructivism which holds that reality is co-constructed through social and cultural practices alongside individual beliefs (Palincsar, 1998). The study sought to understand the subjective meaning the participants constructed of their lived experiences and how they navigated their identities between different cultural contexts, therefore, the Social Constructivist approach was especially suited to this research. This framework was particularly appropriate given that the participants’ expression of their identity shifted in response to cultural norms and social expectations depending on location. Furthermore, it acknowledges that identity is continuously negotiated through interaction with the environment (Saleem et al., 2021), making it aligned with the complexities the participants faced as LGBTQ+ immigrants living between contrasting cultures.

2.4. Demographic Information

Participants were asked to report demographic information including age, race, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and country of residence.

2.5. Interview Schedule

The interview was semi-structured in nature, and the schedule was applied loosely to encourage participants to further reflect on their experiences. The semi-structured interview format allowed the interviews to have consistency and flexibility simultaneously. Core questions ensured that all participants discussed topics relevant to the research question, while open-ended prompts allowed participants to expand on areas most meaningful to them without being led, enhancing the richness and authenticity of the data.

2.6. Procedure

An ethics application was submitted, and ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent's University London. Recruitment materials were circulated via social media. Participants completed pre-screening through the participant information sheet and provided informed consent prior to interviews. After each interview, participants were debriefed and given additional support resources, and data was anonymised and secured on a password-protected device.

Interviews were conducted with five participants as data saturation was reached, as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were analysed using a four-stage approach to IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Transcripts of the interviews were read repeatedly, and notes were recorded to uncover patterns and themes. Each of the participant's lived experiences were interpreted through the key aspects of phenomenological analysis: spatiality, temporality, intersubjectivity, and embodiment (Smith & Osborn, 2004, 2008, 2015). Themes were coded, evidenced by interview data, and supported by the literature. Findings were reported by interpretation of quotations alongside researcher insights.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021) Code of Ethics. Given the involvement of LGBTQ+ individuals and immigrants, sensitivity towards minority groups was essential (McNallie, 2017; Shea et al., 2022; Veldhuis, 2022). Safeguarding protocols were in place in case distress arose (McNallie, 2017; Silverio et al., 2022). Due to the potentially triggering nature of discussing experiences regarding sexuality, the research supervisor, a qualified and accredited therapist, was on call to contain or support participants.

3. Results

The sample consisted of one queer nonbinary lesbian (age 33), two gay men (ages 33 and 34), one bisexual woman (age 42), and one queer trans woman (age 39), three were Malaysian Chinese, one was Bengali and Malaysian, and one was Thai and Chinese. Two participants immigrated to the United States, one to Australia, one to the United Kingdom, and one to New Zealand. Results indicated five superordinate themes: *1. Navigating Restrictive Environments in Country of Origin*, *2. Embodied Impact of Closeting*, *3. Labour of Secrecy and Identity as Performance*, *4. Immigration and Coming Out as Freedom*, and *5. Integrating Past and Present Across Borders*, each with their own subordinate themes as reported in Table 1.

Table 1 Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Navigating Restrictive Environments in Country of Origin	1.1 Reading the Room and Monitoring the Self
	1.2 Social Norms and Community Surveillance
	1.3 Safety vs. Risk in Legal Context
2. Embodied Impact of Closeting	2.1 Abnormal Feelings
	2.2 Physical Sensations
3. Labour of Secrecy and Identity as Performance	3.1 Hiding in Plain Sight and Modifying Behaviour
	3.2 Living a Lie and the Cost of Deception
	3.3 The Internet as a Third Space

4. Immigration and Coming Out as Freedom	4.1 Liberation
	4.2 Gradual Disclosure and Building Belonging
	4.3 Relief and Ease Once Out
5. Integrating Past and Present Across Borders	5.1 Contrasts Between Countries and Difficulty Returning
	5.2 Homesickness Making Cultural Belonging Bittersweet
	5.3 Hope and Desire for Social Change

3.1. Theme 1: Navigating Restrictive Environments in Country of Origin

3.1.1. Sub-theme 1.1: Reading the Room and Monitoring the Self

This sub-theme captured the hypervigilance required of LGBTQ+ individuals concealing their identities within unsafe or restrictive environments. According to Pachankis and Jackson (2022), most LGBTQ+ individuals will experience the closet to some extent, and the Developmental Model of the Closet suggests that adolescence, when the need to closet is often most intense, can impact the rest of one's life, even after coming out.

Participants explained that early life was filled with guesswork when relating to the outside world and childhood was marked by uncertainty and strategic evaluation of others' intentions. After years of concealment, participants described their talent for discerning trustworthiness and expressed their desire to connect with others like them, and how they developed an affinity for identifying who was "safe" and who was not.

Participants learned that belonging to the group was contingent on conformity. The desire for authentic connection was present in childhood; however, safety and survival took precedence. Fitting in became a prerequisite for survival and so, participants learned to hide. Children may begin lying to serve their own self-interest (Wilson et al., 2003). However, Ding et al. (2023) found that children's lying was moderated by parental warmth. For LGBTQ+ children who anticipate rejection or sense emotional distance from caregivers, and therefore do not receive loving warmth, lying becomes necessary adaptive strategy for protection.

Hypervigilance thus emerges as a survival mechanism when concealment is the only way to receive protection. Qualter et al. (2012) highlight how lonely children become hypervigilant to social threats, and for LGBTQ+ children forced to isolate in the closet, self-monitoring becomes all-consuming. Developmental milestones come second to the fight or flight response triggered by hiding. As Gupta (2022) notes, queer individuals can experience trauma when they learn that those meant to protect them will not, and that they are alone in environments that were supposed to be their safety.

3.1.2. Sub-theme 1.2: Social Norms and Community Surveillance

This sub-theme explained the severity of the social pressures participants faced in their country of origin. Although the literature highlights the social benefits of accepting LGBTQ+ couples (Soylemez & Rachitskiy, 2023), many cultures globally have not yet adopted such acceptance. Even where same-sex relationships have technically become legal, mainstream culture may flow at a different pace, creating a disparity between what is legal and what is socially tolerated.

Participants described the social environment in their countries of origin as characterised by continual surveillance and behavioural policing, which intensified the psychological strain of remaining closeted. They emphasised the role of religious norms in shaping a restrictive environment.

Religious restriction functioned as a barrier to authentic self-expression and limited the knowledge and language available for recognising one's identity. Religious Trauma Syndrome is a term used to describe the psychological harm restrictive and controlling religious practices may inflict (Singh et al., 2024). When a child is taught a narrow set of acceptable behaviours, any deviation becomes difficult to navigate and even potentially traumatic. Participants noted that their religious community also served as a mechanism of surveillance.

Even as adults living abroad, participants continued to conceal their identity when returning home due to their various religious community's influences. Staying closeted was seen as necessary as, back in their country of origin, group conformity took precedence over individual authenticity. Their experience reflects the tension between individualist and collectivist cultures, where in collectivist societies, in tandem with the many benefits of collectivism, conformity and family reputation often outweigh individual authenticity (Sadana, 2025). In contrast, participants' countries of residence provided more individualistic norms that enabled greater authenticity (Darwish & Huber, 2003).

Participants also described similar pressures rooted in familial obligation and community expectations. They reflected on being raised in a collectivist culture where familial approval was paramount and further highlighted the cultural preoccupation with reputation and the opinions of others.

Participants learned early that community acceptance outweighed personal authenticity. Survival depended on concealment and, as children, participants knew that they could be outcast for being gay, and that childhood fear persisted into adulthood. Despite living openly abroad, participants explained that they reverted to hiding upon returning to their country of origin due to fear of legal repercussions and community policing.

Across accounts, participants described how community surveillance and collectivist expectations reinforced the need for concealment. These social norms created environments where hypervigilance remained essential for survival, and the psychological toll of this monitoring persisted into adulthood.

3.1.3. Sub-theme 1.1: Reading the Room and Monitoring the Self

This sub-theme reflected how continued closeting and avoidance of public displays of affection in their countries of origin were shaped by the very real fear of legal persecution, including the possibility of death. Under such extreme stakes, it was unsurprising that participants experienced profound psychological distress in childhood as they attempted to navigate identity formation and authenticity in fear, isolation, and secrecy (Muldoon et al., 2020).

Participants shared that their reason for immigrating was the cumulative mental burden of living closeted. While they expressed affection for their country of origin, the absence of legal protection made long-term safety and visibility impossible.

The transition to a new country did not result in an immediate internal shift. It took time to feel comfortable coming out of the closet in their new country. Childhood hypervigilance persisted, even after borders and oceans were crossed. Legal practicalities were roadblocks for participants when they did not feel safe coming out without legal residency. Only after permanent residency was obtained were they able to express themselves openly and claim a sense of “home”. The lives and freedoms of many in the LGBTQ+ community are at the mercy of lawmakers, resulting in constant stress and negative impacts to mental health (Menhinick & Sanders, 2023; Russell et al., 2011).

How participants defined safety for themselves, therefore, was important to their understanding of identity and belonging. Psychological safety is defined as the perceived ability to take risks and express the self authentically without fear of repercussion (Gardner & Prasad, 2022; Wouters-Soomers et al., 2022). Participants felt as though they could only obtain safety in self-expression when the legal risks were mitigated. Without the legal protection of visas or LGBTQ+-affirming law, participants did not feel safe. This was true in their new countries of residence and when they returned to visit their country of origin. Participants shared the severity of legal consequences in their countries of origin, explaining that the threat of the death penalty remained the primary reason for concealing their identity during visits.

Visibility also was described as a risk between borders. For some participants, day to day life in their new countries of residence was relatively pleasant, as they passed as straight or cis and could, therefore, decide when to disclose their queer identities. At border patrol, however, the danger of being outed was ubiquitous. They shared how the inability to change the gender marker on their legal documents was a source of sadness for them and was a safety risk globally every time they travelled.

Travelling or driving inside their new country of residence was an affirming experience, but returning to their country of origin was a repeated struggle because of the legal barriers associated with changing legal documentation for Trans people there. The stigma associated with being Trans today carries many physical and mental health tolls due to limited access to resources and opportunities (Millar & Brooks, 2021; White Hughto et al., 2015). For participants, the persistent stress of not having the same legal rights and protections as straight cisgender citizens made life in their country of origin increasingly unbearable.

While social acceptance does not always align with legal progress, participants consistently described legal persecution as the greatest barrier to authenticity in their country of origin. Coming out presented risks that were too great, and the absence of legal protection prevented participants from envisioning a future there. Ultimately, participants sought safety in new countries where they could legally reside and express themselves openly.

3.2. Theme 2: Embodied Impact of Closeting

3.2.1.Sub-theme 2.1: Abnormal Feelings

This sub-theme detailed the emotional impact of closeting in a restrictive environment. Participants described closeting as an isolating experience, marked by feeling fundamentally different from their peers. Participants explained that, as children, they felt “abnormal”, and reflected on how this shaped their development. While heterosexual classmates openly explored early attraction, participants felt disconnected and forced to navigate these developmental milestones in isolation and secrecy.

The awareness of being different created psychological strain and led to noticeable shifts in personality and behaviour for participants. Feelings of guilt and shame emerged early, as participants internalised negative societal messages about being different. Participants shared that at a young age they understood being gay was considered shameful because it was considered so abnormal.

Those feelings persisted even after immigration. For participants, the psychological impact of closeting travelled with them across borders, rooted in fear of legal repercussions but also in fear of being perceived as different. Within their cultural context, deviation from heteronormative expectations was understood as morally wrong and socially dangerous. Participants reflected on how collectivist cultural norms heightened the pressure to conform. In many Malaysian households, for example, strict parental expectations and rules outline family functioning, and adherence to these rules is seen as vital for the wellbeing and survival of the family unit (Sumari et al., 2019). Together, participant accounts across countries of origin illustrate how the emotional wounds of closeting (feelings of defectiveness, guilt, and shame), become embodied experiences that did not dissipate by the crossing of a border.

3.2.2.Sub-theme 2.2: Physical Sensations

This sub-theme explored the different physical sensations participants associated with being closeted. Hiding their sexualities in the metaphorical closet coincided with hiding themselves more broadly as well, resulting in noticeable changes in personality expression and a diminished desire to be physically seen. Participants shared how closeting pushed them to retreat inward. Concealment became equated with safety. Visibility felt dangerous, and withdrawing physically, became the most viable means of protection.

Participants also described bodily sensations of suffocation as adults during visits home. After living openly abroad, the return to hypervigilance resulted in an inability to breathe. Participants explained how being in public in their countries of origin felt smothering compared to the authenticity they could embody in their countries of residence.

The restriction of the closet became intolerable after experiencing the freedom of being out. Participants noted that returning to their countries of origin sometimes reactivated feelings from adolescence.

Closeting was associated with anger and the anxiety of a persistent fight or flight response. The fear of exposure created physiological stress that became the norm. Such embodied reactions reflect previous research showing that closeting can produce chronic strain, particularly when associated with stigma and secrecy (Gupta, 2022; Suppes et al., 2021).

3.3. Theme 3: Labour of Secrecy and Identity as Performance

3.3.1.Sub-theme 3.1: Hiding in Plain Sight and Modifying Behaviour

This sub-theme illustrated how participants modified their behaviour depending on location. While returning to their countries of origin, participants felt compelled to present their romantic relationships as platonic due to the risks associated with public displays of affection. In contrast, inside their countries of residence, they were able to disclose their identities to colleagues and express affection openly without self-policing.

Modifying behaviour based on location was a natural solution to restriction for participants. Performing heterosexuality or asexuality became a survival strategy in their countries of origin. Participants described how this performance carried over into their new country of residence until they gradually unlearned the internalised fear of visibility.

Although participants eventually felt comfortable showing affection in their new countries, they described going “above and beyond” to conceal their relationships back in their countries of origin due to fears of persecution. Participants also explained the gratitude they felt for not having to pretend in their workplaces in their countries of residence. Research shows that being out at work offers significant benefits, including increased wellbeing and productivity (Gardner & Prasad, 2022; Lathabhavan & Mishra, 2024). Visibility made participants feel closer to their coworkers and, as a result,

they felt an authentic sense of belonging in their countries of residence.

Another reason participants modified their behaviour in their countries of origin was because of pressure to behave in more traditionally feminine or masculine ways, whereas in their new countries of residence, they could freely explore their gender expression in ways that felt authentic, freeing up mental capacity to focus elsewhere.

The pressure to perform traditional femininity or masculinity in the workplace in their countries of origin led to feeling as though they did not belong, and eventually, led to them hating their workplace and coworkers. In contrast, participants felt free to express their queerness and androgyny openly in their new countries of residence. Recent literature has found that even seemingly small changes in inclusivity practices can have a large impact on making members of the queer community feel accepted and therefore happier at work (Trotter & Yates, 2024) and for participants, the freedom of being out and authentic in work settings led to feelings of belonging and acceptance that improved their work and overall quality of life.

Across accounts, concealing identity in the country of origin was described as isolating, exhausting labour and a full-time performance of the False Self (Winnicott, 1965). Immigration offered the relief of authenticity, and the ability to live without such performances was one of the most valued benefits of moving abroad.

3.3.2. Sub-theme 3.2: Living a Lie and the Cost of Deception

Participants framed constant self-policing as the performance of living a lie. Sustaining false narratives required immense psychological and physiological effort. Lying is associated with increased blood pressure and elevated heart rate, resulting in negative health outcomes (Ten Brinke et al., 2015), and participants echoed this burden.

Participants expressed the toll deception took on their mental health. Lying can erode self-esteem (Preuter et al., 2023), and for participants, maintaining secrecy became increasingly unsustainable.

Another reason lying became difficult was the desire to create authentic and honest relationships. Participants expressed a longing for honesty and deeper emotional bonds, a fundamental human need rooted in evolution, as those seen and accepted by the group were more likely to be protected and survive (Morelli et al., 2014; Neel & Lassetter, 2019). This need still runs through human DNA, and for queer people, having to lie about the self goes against the basic human desire to feel accepted and included. Concealment violated this biological need, causing ongoing psychological distress. Being unable to be honest about who they were made their connections feel shallow in their countries of origin, while being out of the closet in their new countries of residence created greater opportunities for genuine connection.

3.3.3. Sub-theme 3.3: The Internet as a Third Space

This subordinate theme explained how the internet emerged as a “third space” where participants could express themselves more freely, access representation, find hope, and connect with a global LGBTQ+ community. Digital spaces have been shown to increase inclusivity by democratising access to resources and opportunities (Nyabuto, 2023). For participants, online environments offered anonymity and a reprieve from real-world surveillance. Online interactions were a way to be authentic without physical risk.

The fear of physical persecution in their country of origin remained, but the internet was a place where they could go to authentically share. The internet also became a space for information-seeking and exploration of topics not readily accessed offline. Participants emphasised how online, without borders, there was an affirming global community and resources available to them.

Social media also provided a source of hope for participants. They shared that growing up there was no representation of happy and openly queer lives. Social media can offer a vital sense of community for queer individuals who cannot be fully open offline (Coker et al., 2023). Despite any potential risks of online disclosure, the importance of seeing oneself represented cannot be overlooked (Are et al., 2024). For participants, the lack of a true sense of safety or belonging anywhere in the physical world was offset by seeing happy gay couples online. Representation on social media gave participants a sense of hope for a future where gay people could be accepted.

Participants described the internet as one of the few places where they could see queer joy modelled openly and feel connected to the world rather than isolated from it. Unlike offline, the digital sphere allowed them to exist without the labour of behaviour-modification or performance.

3.4. Theme 4: Immigration and Coming Out as Freedom

3.4.1.Sub-theme 4.1: Liberation

This sub-theme captured the sense of liberation participants felt when coming out in their countries of residence, a moment described as pivotal and transformative. Coming out marked a shift from restraint to visibility, enabling participants to release the burden of psychological constraint. Research has linked coming out with feelings of liberation because of the mental health benefits that authenticity provides, namely reduced stress and anxiety (Sahoo et al., 2023), and participant accounts mirrored these feelings. Participants described feeling confident and grounded in their new communities after openly sharing their queer identity.

Coming out also marked the end of the restraint felt in the closet. In their new countries of residence, participants felt at ease and as though the burdens of concealment could be dropped in their new homes, both physically and mentally. Participants expressed a contentment with themselves that required courage, especially after years of internalised messages that being gay was “wrong”. In their new countries of residence, participants were finally safe to experience the emancipation of independence. Early years abroad were described as a “honeymoon phase”, meaning that those first moments of freedom were especially sweet.

The weight of a past self was lifted when participants immigrated. Starting over in a new country allowed participants the freedom to embody their authentic selves, unburdened by the anchor of a previous version. Migration gave participants the chance to experience a psychological release. For the first time, they had the ability to live without the stress of hypervigilance or performance.

3.4.2.Sub-theme 4.2: Gradual Disclosure and Building Belonging

This sub-theme offered some nuance by highlighting how coming out was a gradual process for participants. Internalised homophobia and childhood fears persisted across borders. However, the safety and authenticity available in their countries of residence allowed participants to slowly cultivate a sense of belonging. As the participants grew increasingly aligned with their True Selves (Winnicott, 1965), they formed more genuine relationships.

Although remnants of doubts from their old life persisted, eventually, participants were able to build authentic connections once out. Gradually, participants were able to build lives in their new countries that felt safe and free. The freedom of authenticity and visibility gave them the ability to build community. These results were in line with other studies that also found that authenticity brings belonging and authentic connection for out members of the LGBTQ+ community (Sahoo et al., 2023; Suppes et al., 2021). For participants, building belonging stemmed from building discernment around exactly what and who might fit into their life.

Even after physically crossing a border, participants needed time to shift their internal experiences and build safety. Only once they fully understood themselves could they share that self with others, which gradually led to building more authentic lives and communities. It must be noted however, that authenticity is not a stable experience. Often times, authenticity can also be framed as a tyranny (O’ Rourke, 2024) that non-normative individuals must embrace to be fully respected societally and to be accepted as legitimate beings (at times, for the sake of safety and multiplicity of self it is possible that their gender/sexual variance may not be the central feature that needs to be 'authentically revealed or expressed).

3.4.3.Sub-theme 4.3: Relief and Ease Once Out

This sub-theme focused on the relief participants experienced after coming out of the closet. Participants consistently described a sense of comfort once they were able to live openly, reporting that being out was easier and less exhausting than remaining closeted. Without the vigilance required to remain closeted and the constant fear of exposure that had previously shaped their daily lives, everyday functioning became lighter and less stressful. Participants shared that their decision to come out was driven by the desire for life to be “easy”.

They went on to explain how the ability to be open and honest created a sense of ease that drastically increased their quality-of-life day to day. The mental and psychological weight of lying was too heavy previously, and now things were lighter. The stress of strategic identity management has been shown to take a concerted amount of energy to maintain for members of the LGBTQ+ community (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018), and by finally coming out, participants were able to let that effort go and focus energy elsewhere. For participants, being out of the closet and living life openly felt like a breath of fresh air.

Authenticity represented relief and ease for participants who previously needed to work to create a False Self

(Winnicott, 1965). Everyday life was no longer burdened by the toll of performance, with fewer mental resources spent on monitoring behaviour, participants could direct their energy toward relationships, career, community, and personal growth. Participants explained that in their country of residence visibility made life more enjoyable.

Although safety and belonging took time to build, participants emphasised that the effort was worthwhile. Physically moving to a different country did not change internal experiences overnight, but with gradual shifts, participants eventually found community support and belonging that felt like relief and liberation.

3.5. Theme 5: Integrating Past and Present Across Borders

3.5.1. Sub-theme 5.1: Contrasts Between Countries and Difficulty Returning

This sub-theme explored the contrast between participants' experiences in their country of origin and their country of residence, and how liberation from the closet made reverting to old survival strategies difficult. Returning to permanently live again in their countries of origin would be profoundly difficult for participants, as they recognised that living authentically required prioritising their own wellbeing rather than the wellbeing and opinions of others. Although parents may find it difficult to be separated from children migrating abroad (Ferreira, 2025), participants felt compelled to build their lives in places where they could exist openly and safely.

Returning to their country of origin meant re-entering restrictive environments and reverting to old coping strategies as means of survival. Research suggests that revisiting early environments can trigger regression to earlier emotional states (Preetz et al., 2022). For LGBTQ+ individuals, this experience is intensified when returning to a country where visibility means criminalisation.

Participants described returning to their country of origin as emotionally painful and potentially retraumatising, consistent with research showing that returning to traumatic environments can re-ignite earlier harm (Schippert et al., 2023). Coming out and living abroad awarded participants new perspectives and elucidated just how much space queer people can take up globally.

Experiencing acceptance abroad allowed participants to envision possibilities for belonging. While in childhood participants may have experienced isolation, as immigrant adults they now had the freedom to choose where, and with whom, they authentically belonged. The contrast between closeting and visibility made the thought of going back inside the closet intolerable. Participants expressed extreme discomfort at the thought of having to move back to inhabit those restrictive childhood spaces once again, and that they preferred their new authentic lives over the idea of permanently returning.

3.5.2. Sub-theme 5.2: Homesickness Making Cultural Belonging Bittersweet

This sub-theme added to the complexities LGBTQ+ immigrants navigated when newfound freedoms were enjoyed while, at the same time, the comforts of home were missed. Despite preferring the authentic lives built in their new countries, homesickness remained a challenge for participants. They missed the warmth of home, the familiar flavours of the food, and thoughts on LGBTQ+ relationships aside, the kindness of the people. Participants described loving their families and communities of origin while also feeling wounded by the discrimination woven into daily life there. They longed for some comforts of home yet knew they could not safely return as their full selves. Participants described this phenomenon as an inability to win. The way they naturally spoke and behaved was Malaysian, and they felt as though they needed to hide those things to fit in when in their new countries of residence. They expressed grief that the only reason they could not have a full life in their countries of origin was just because of what they do privately with another consenting adult in the bedroom.

As rewarding as freedom felt in their new countries, participants explained that they never fully felt they belonged anywhere, and they felt a smouldering anguish at the reality of having to give up so much of their culture solely because of their sexuality. They wished that they could feel more at home in their countries of residence or that they could safely return to their countries of origin.

Code Switching is often defined as the phenomenon of switching between linguistic codes (Cross, 2023). However, it has also been socially noted that when individuals are forced to switch between different cultural contexts, it often also results in a code switch between behaviours and ways of relating to others that can be mentally taxing (Durkee & Williams, 2013). Different cultural contexts for the participants meant that they were expected to hide certain aspects of themselves in some scenarios or be able to let the mask down in others. Assimilating more into the ways of life in their country of residence was also a struggle, as it felt for them like betraying the customs and people in their country

of origin. Every milestone in their new country of residence felt like cementing their life there and getting further away from the lives they knew in their countries of origin.

Participants boiled down their feelings of homesickness to missing the familiar and comforting tastes of home. Food is a powerful source of nostalgia (Reid et al., 2022), and food was an especially sweet memory for participants. The feelings of warmth that comfort food provided also translated to a wish for that comfort to be in other aspects of life as well. Participants explained that they enjoy their lives in their countries of residence until they remember the food ‘back home’.

Some participants explained that they were excited to bring their current partners to their country of origin, even with all the danger, because of the cuisine. They went on to explain that despite social challenges in their country of origin, there were still things they missed and wanted to share with the person they love, the largest being the delicious food.

The participants highlighted a lingering desire for acceptance in their country of origin. They expressed that, were it not for legislation criminalising homosexuality, they would wish to remain there. Although this homesickness was often expressed as a desire to taste familiar foods, underneath, there was a deeper desire to be accepted by the place they still considered ‘home’. Food thus became a conduit for the complex feelings associated with loving a place that did not reciprocate. As happy as participants were to be out of the closet and free in their countries of residence, homesickness persisted along with a persistent desire for acceptance in their country of origin.

3.5.3. Sub-theme 5.3: Hope and Desire for Social Change

This sub-group highlighted participants’ hopes for future social change in their country of origin. Ultimately, participants hoped that visibility would generate a ripple effect, encouraging others to live authentically and contributing to long-term social transformation. They expressed a desire for meaningful change in their country of origin so that acceptance would one day be possible, yet this hope was coloured by the fear that, by navigating both worlds, they might never fully belong or be safe in either. Participants perceived their sexuality as innate, while wider social opinion in their country of origin continued to mischaracterise it as a choice, and because of this they wished to see a shift in cultural attitudes that would foster greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities.

Participants felt the social prejudice in their country of origin was unwarranted, as they did not feel it was right to be ostracised or persecuted simply for who they were. Participants also expressed that slowly, they noticed changes being made with younger generations feeling more comfortable to fight back against cultural and systemic oppression in their countries of origin. One participant shared that their cousin was out of the closet to their family in their country of origin, and this was inspired by the participant living an authentically open life in their new country of residence.

Seemingly small changes such as these, participants believed, could contribute to larger cultural shifts. While providing evidence or scientific facts has been shown to be ineffective at changing minds, helping individuals embrace emotions and perspectives of others has been shown over time to be successful in creating change (Toomey, 2023).

While participants valued their lives abroad, and despite their hope, they also expressed fear that political changes could jeopardise their safety, even in their countries of residence. Participants shared that they are generally happy, but they do still fear that at any moment their rights could be taken away.

Feeling as though neither country was truly ‘home’ also left participants concerned that they would have no safe place to turn should LGBTQ+ legal protections in their country of residence be removed. Immigration alone can generate a sense of displacement (Bhugra & Becker, 2005), but this uncertainty may be intensified when returning to a country would require concealing one’s authentic identity, leaving participants feeling particularly vulnerable. Overall, participants reported being grateful for the freedoms granted through immigration, but they also feared the potential loss of those freedoms. These findings highlighted the delicate balance for participants between safety and visibility and revealed the complexities of navigating different cultural environments for LGBTQ+ immigrants.

4. Discussion

Previous research into LGBTQ+ immigrant experience focused predominantly on refugees forced to seek asylum due to fear of persecution and immediate threats of violence in their countries of origin (Attia et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2023; Gottvall et al., 2022; Kostenius et al., 2021). In contrast, research on LGBTQ+ immigrants who selectively conceal their identity remains underrepresented. The current study addressed that gap through an IPA of five anonymised semi-structured interviews analysed through a Social Constructivist lens.

While prior research has made important contributions in documenting trauma, minority stress, and post-migration adjustment, it has conceptualised migration as a singular event followed by resettlement and repair. The current findings complicate this framing by demonstrating that for participants with transnational mobility, identity negotiation is an ongoing, cyclical process. The current study challenges the linear assumptions embedded within much of the dominant asylum-focused literature.

By exploring full lived experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants rather than exclusively trauma or persecution, the current study addressed existing conceptual and methodological omissions in the existing literature. The current study reoriented the focus from forced displacement towards cyclical identity negotiation thereby extending psychological understanding of migration beyond linear models and contributing to a more nuanced account of LGBTQ+ immigrant life. Whereas earlier studies have importantly highlighted violence and vulnerability, the current findings revealed how agency, strategic concealment, and relational loyalty exist alongside distress. These results suggest that the application of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) to mobile populations may require expansion to account for fluctuating, context-dependent stressors rather than just stable minority positioning within a single national setting.

Five superordinate themes emerged in the current study, and the analysis revealed how LGBTQ+ immigrants managed their sense of self and belonging at all stages of immigration. *Navigating Restrictive Environments in the Country of Origin* showed how participants have been compelled to continuously assess social, cultural, and familial contexts for safety, developing strategies such as “reading the room”, anticipating negative reactions, and assessing the risk of exposure within religiously conservative, gossiping, or legally criminalised spaces. These findings resonate with existing literature on hypervigilance and anticipated stigma (Attia et al., 2022; Haghiri-Vijeh & Clark, 2022) yet extend it by illustrating how such hypervigilance becomes a transferable skill that participants re-activated upon return visits. This suggests that concealment is an adaptive, contextually responsive practice rather than simply a residue of pre-immigration persecution. *The Embodied Impact of Closeting* reflected the internal emotional and physiological consequences of prolonged concealment, including feelings of frustration, fear, shame, and guilt, as well as the visceral shift participants experienced when returning to their country of origin, where they reverted to previous versions of themselves. While Winnicott’s (1965) True and False Self framework offers a useful interpretive lens, the present findings indicate that the False Self may be experienced less as an inauthentic lie and more as a protective identity state that is activated situationally. This nuance complicates existing interpretations of authenticity and suggests a more fluid model of selfhood across borders. *The Labour of Secrecy and Identity as Performance* highlighted the ongoing effort required to maintain a fractured self, including the creation and maintenance of false narratives, the harm of sustained lies, and the splitting of identity across different relationships or geographic locations. Here, the findings deepen Quinn and Chaudoir’s (2009) work on concealment by demonstrating that secrecy across national contexts produces a geographically disrupted performance of identity, intensifying cognitive and emotional labour through repetition. The cyclical re-entry into concealment differentiates this group from permanently resettled migrants and has been under-researched previously. *Immigration and Coming Out as Freedom* showed how different environments enabled participants to embody newfound openness and authenticity, experiencing expanding relationships and the development of supportive and affirming communities. Consistent with the findings of Cheung et al. (2023), freedom in a new country was described as both liberating and disorienting. However, unlike studies centred on permanent relocation, participants here did not experience freedom as a stable endpoint. The conditionality of shifting borders and therefore shifting emotional states highlights the instability of belonging within transnational lives. Finally, *Integrating Past and Present Across Borders* highlighted the emotional tension of maintaining different selves in different places and participants’ hopes for eventual familial acceptance and increased tolerance in their country of origin. Their efforts mirror identity process theory (Breakwell, 1986), yet the current findings also suggest that identity continuity is not always restored through migration. Instead, participants often tolerated or suffered through fragmentation to preserve familial ties, revealing the relational costs of maintaining their different identities. Together, these themes demonstrate that while immigration offers significant relief from restrictive environments for LGBTQ+ individuals, the lasting impact of early suppression of the True Self continues to shape the lives of those managing visibility and secrecy across borders (Winnicott, 1965). The findings also indicate that psychological liberation does not occur automatically by the crossing of a border. Mobility can produce a complex identity structure in which safety, fear, loyalty, joy, grief, inauthenticity, and authenticity can all coexist but are constantly being renegotiated. This offers a more complex psychological picture of LGBTQ+ immigrants than previously presented in asylum-centred narratives.

5. Conclusion

Previous research described the experiences of forced migrants as traumatic and highlighted the reasons why LGBTQ+ individuals would seek asylum from persecution (Haghiri-Vijeh & Clark, 2022). Such reasons have included discrimination, harassment, prolonged psychological distress, and immediate threats of violence in their countries of origin (Attia et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2023; Gottvall et al., 2022; Kostenius et al., 2021). The present study explored

the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ immigrants managing visibility and secrecy across borders. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed five superordinate themes: *Navigating Restrictive Environments in Country of Origin*, *Embodied Impact of Closeting*, *Labour of Secrecy and Identity as Performance*, *Immigration and Coming Out as Freedom*, and *Integrating Past and Present Across Borders*. The study will benefit society by highlighting previously underexplored minority lived experiences of immigration. The findings underscore the importance of understanding LGBTQ+ immigrant needs holistically in the modern day and could help mental health practitioners adopt culturally and technologically sensitive and validating care approaches when working with this minority group. Future directions include studying the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who are “closeted” in their country of residence but are “out” on holiday, studying the lived experiences of those who consider themselves to be “out” in a country where being gay is illegal, and studying how diagnosed mental health conditions impact the lives of LGBTQ+ immigrants who are “closeted” in their countries of origin and “out” in a new country.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

Authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent’s University London.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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