

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CONNECTION IN THE LIVES OF LGBTQ+ SOUTH ASIANS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Connection has been found to be an important factor for LGBTQ+ wellbeing as it pertains to the relationships between stigma, discrimination, and psychological distress, and LGBTQ+ people of color in particular are known to face intersectional minority stress at high levels. This study examined the role of connection specifically for LGBTQ+ South Asians, a population which is highly underrepresented within both LGBTQ+ and South Asian literatures. Fifteen LGBTQ+ second-generation South Asian adults, aged 19-35, were interviewed about their insights regarding connection and disconnection within their own lived experience. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis and revealed common experiential themes across the group of interviewees, which reflected three distinct forms of connection participants deemed as distinctly meaningful: i) interpersonal connections and context ii) intrapersonal connection, and iii) indirect connection. Subthemes reflected unique challenges, joys, struggles, and examples of LGBTQ+ South Asian resilience in each of these life areas. Implications of these findings are discussed for counseling professionals, higher education professionals, community organizations, and others seeking to better understand and support the wellbeing of this population.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, South Asian, connection, minority stress, intersectionality

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest growing population currently in the United States and are projected to be the largest immigrant population by the year 2065 (Cohn, 2015; US Census, 2020). A large subgroup of this population are made up of South Asians, whose population increased 40% between the years of 2010 and 2017 (SAALT, 2019). These cultures, which include those whose heritage traces back to the geographical areas including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, share a number of cultural values and similarities, but also naturally encompass a wide array of differences and diversity in terms of language, religion, socioeconomic status, and other cultural practices (Choudhury et al., 2009; SAALT, 2019). Though research involving Asian Americans, and specifically South Asians, has been increasing given our growing populations in the United States and marginalization within American society, there remains little research that attends to the intersectional experiences of diverse individuals within this population, as reflected by a three-decade content analysis of relevant literature (Inman, Devdas, Spektor, & Pendse, 2014).

One such example is LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer) South Asians, whose identities may sometimes be erased or underrepresented within broader LGBTQ+ and South Asian literatures (Ching, Lee, Chen, So, & Williams, 2018; Inman et al., 2014). It is important to note that, just as the South Asian population is increasing, the percentage of Americans self-identifying as LGBTQ+ appears to be increasing among younger generations, with one in six adult members of Gen-Z identifying as non-heterosexual (Jones, 2021). While this may, in part, reflect a shift towards greater societal acceptance and an increased understanding and awareness of LGBTQ+ identities, individuals at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities (e.g. LGBTQ+ identities and South Asian identities) face a

whole host of unique pressures, stigma, and experiences that merit attention (Ching et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Meyer, 2003; Sandil et al., 2015). For example, intersectional experiences may include navigating cultural differences, generational family differences, religious norms, marriage norms or expectations of traditional heterosexual marriage, stigma from both Western and South Asian cultures, and possible marginalization within both South Asian and LGBTQ+ groups or organizations (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Choudhury et al., 2009). Given the apparent growth in South Asian populations as well as the increase in LGBTQ+ self-identification among younger generations, it is all the more crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of those whose identities reside in the overlap of these communities in order to inform how to better support, meet the needs of, and recognize the unique and vibrant strengths and culture of this population.

The present study sought to examine, among adult LGBTQ+ second generation South Asians, the experience of connection, predominantly in terms of interpersonal and community connection, but also provided space to touch upon other forms of connection that felt relevant to participants, such as connection to the self. Though the primary focus of the study, and therefore the focus of the guiding interview questions, was on sexual orientation identity, topics relating gender identity and gender diversity also arose organically during the process of these interviews, given that all aspects of identity are so tightly interwoven in ways that influence experience. As reflected in these interviews and in the broader sociopolitical context, transgender, nonbinary, and other gender diverse South Asian people experience an additional set of complex challenges and have different unique experiences that also deserve the attention of research focused predominantly on gender diversity. This is an additional area where future research is certainly needed, despite it not having been the initial focal point of the present study.

Review of the Literature

Though, as previously mentioned, there has been a notable increase in research representation of the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities as well as South Asian communities, particularly in the wake of 9/11, there remains a dearth of research specific to the intersection of these identities. This not only reflects the lack of resources dedicated to understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color and leaves critical gaps in the literature, but also leaves very little to guide research-based practice for counselors, LGBTQ+ support organizations, higher education professionals, and other practitioners who interface with and serve this community. The following literature review has been informed by studies spanning meta-analyses, qualitative interview-based approaches, more standard traditional quantitative survey-based research, and innovative postcolonial feminist analysis of literature and personal narratives. These studies span those specific to queer South Asians, but also pull from literature that focuses more broadly on Asian, Asian American, and LGBTQ+ identity, given the fairly limited existing scholarly research specific to South Asian queer identities and experiences. Considerations pertaining to age and generational status, connection and group belonging, an overview of guiding theoretical frameworks, and gaps in the literature are explored below.

Age and Generational Considerations

The rationale behind focusing this study on second generation LGBTQ+ South Asians stemmed, in part, from previous literature reflecting significant differences in the experiences of first and second generation South Asians (Aujla, 2000; Inman et al., 2014) as well as literature on identity development with subsets of this group (Iwamoto, Negi, Partiali, & Creswell, 2013). While research on South Asian generational status has appeared to increase over the years, the bulk of existing research focuses on first generation, followed by studies including both first and

second generation, but comparatively little research focuses specifically on second generation South Asians, as reflected in a content analysis spanning over 30 years of South Asian American psychological research (Inman et al., 2014). The subset of literature that was found to focus on second generation South Asians did reveal specific themes potentially relevant to this generational group, such as a focus on parenting dynamics, including differences in parenting beliefs across indigenous and western contexts, which has possible implications for dissonance or tensions within first-generation-parent/second generation-child relationships while navigating a bicultural experience of raising a child in a country that differs from one's homeland. Of the limited research that has been conducted with second generation South Asians, it has reflected these themes of possible intergenerational conflict as well as notable differences in experiencing and coping with discrimination, levels of rape myth acceptance, culture and identity negotiation, and unique issues faced by South Asians of different generational status. Additionally, findings indicated that racial identity may help buffer effects of discrimination particularly for second generation South Asians in a way unique from first generation South Asians. Based upon these findings, and in combination with other existing literature, there is value in centering the experiences of second generation queer South Asians, given the pre-existing literature pointing to potential perceived values-discrepancies with family or the challenges of navigating a unique cultural context, which may influence feelings of connection. Additionally, though the research was found by the content analysis to be limited, there has been some indication that coming out as LGBTQ+ to their religious and/or ethnic groups can result in a sense of alienation for queer South Asians, a finding which is echoed through other related literature.

In alignment with previously-mentioned findings, existing qualitative research has utilized the exploration of narrative and literature to highlight multigenerational South Asian

Canadian women's experiences of perpetual "othering" (Aujla, 2000). In particular, this and other similar research has highlighted the intersections of race and gender for this population in ways that undercut their sense of belonging (Patel, 2019). It also highlights the differences and uniqueness in experience for second generation women, having been steeped in assimilation pressures and othering from birth, in their formative adolescent years, and having been exposed deeply to white supremacist pressures during the time in which they would ideally be cultivating a meaningful sense of racial, gender, and sexual and/or romantic orientation identity. Throughout the narratives written by many second generation women were threads of longing for whiteness, even to the point of altering their appearance or drawing childhood portraits of their family as white and blonde-haired, as well as accounts of sexualization, harassment, and being taught, repeatedly, of their "otherness." Though perhaps not as traditional or conventional as other research methodologies, the postcolonial, feminist analysis of these personal narratives is something the present study aimed to build upon by presenting the richness of individual voices and contextualizing how the experience of connection may thread through them. Specifically, given that other research has focused largely on first generation South Asians, the present study aimed to capture the uniqueness of second generation experiences at this point in time when this population's numbers are growing in the U.S. and explore ways in which connection is shaped by racialized and gendered experiences having been brought up in the states while one's parents were not.

In regards to identity development, phenomenological research with second generation Asian Indian Americans between 19-34 years old has illuminated some particular hallmarks of racial and ethnic identity development at these stages of life that raise questions of how these experiences may be shaped by or interact with other unique experiences tied with LGBTQ+

identity (Iwamoto et al., 2013). In both emerging and early adulthood, Asian Indian Americans reported developing closer connections with others from their background as well as with their parents, whose values they begin to appreciate and connect with more; they also tend to engage more actively in cultural clubs and activities, and are aware of the racism their communities experience. During early adulthood in particular, one salient issue that may arise is the one of marriage expectations and pressures to maintain the cultural status quo by marrying another person of Indian background (Iwamoto et al., 2013). The finding that active involvement in cultural clubs or groups as safe spaces for cultural exploration often occurs within the context of college and seems to relate to enhanced feelings of connection with peers prompts the question of whether this experience is shared across the whole spectrum of diverse sexual orientation identities, or whether, in alignment with aforementioned intersectionality literature, there are experiences unique to those at the intersection of South Asian and LGBTQ+ identity. Overall, the emphasis that was found on parents and social reference groups as instrumental to racial and ethnic identity development as well as stage of life trends among this subset of second generation Asian Indian Americans invites further inquiry about how these experiences may either be shared or may differ among LGBTQ+ individuals of similar South Asian background and generational status. The present study focuses solely on adults, given that second generation LGBTQ+ South Asian adults either are in or have navigated through these developmental periods of early and emerging adulthood, and may be going through or have previously gone through similar processes or experiences. Throughout the present study, participants were able to share stories of their lived experiences, past and present, that helped shed light on the unique developmental, relational, and intersectional experiences within this community, as well as how connection may be experienced differently at different junctures throughout the early lifespan.

Group Belonging, Connection, and Disconnection

Connection overall has been found to be an important factor for the LGBTQ+ community as it pertains to the relationship between stigma or discrimination and psychological distress (Craney, Watson, Brownfield, & Flores, 2018; Kaniuka et al., 2019; Puckett, Levitt, Horne, & Hayes-Skelton, 2015; Szymanski & Sung, 2010). Connection with the LGBTQ+ community has been shown to be potentially helpful in mitigating relations between stigma and depression or suicidal behavior (Kaniuka et al., 2019), antibisexual discrimination and psychological distress (Craney, Watson, Brownfield, & Flores, 2018), and, in contrast, lack of connectedness helps explain linkages between internalized heterosexism and psychological distress (Puckett, Levitt, Horne, & Hayes-Skelton, 2015). These findings, paired with findings that LGBTQ+ people of color may have less access to everyday forms of social support and face marginalization in cultural and LGBT+ communities (Ching et al., 2018) make clear the need for more diverse research on the intersections of race and sexual orientation identity.

Specifically among LGBTQ+ Asian adults, social support, specifically in the form of acceptance for one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity, has been shown to be correlated with fewer internalizing symptoms, though these results were strongest when the support was coming from a significant other and data was more mixed for other sources of support, illustrating the complexities both with measuring social support and with the real life impacts of social support for LGBTQ+ Asians (Takeda, 2017). Furthermore, as touched upon earlier, emerging adulthood which often overlaps largely with college years for those who pursue higher education (as does early adulthood, to some extent), is marked by significant identity-related developments and markers for a subset of second-generation South Asians; specifically, these developmental stages and social environments often seem to serve as the context for the

intentional seeking-out of cultural groups and greater active engagement with others of similar backgrounds, in addition to becoming more aware of racist dynamics that impact their community (Iwamoto et al., 2013). This implies group involvement or, more broadly, social connection may be a crucial and worthwhile phenomenon to study among second generation South Asians who are in or may have gone through these stages. The heightened awareness of race and attentiveness to racialized dynamics and experiences is also a relevant factor to consider in regards to minority stress and barriers to feelings of interconnectedness among this particular population.

Existing research has highlighted experiences of identity conflict and multiple overlapping forms of alienation from LGBTQ+ and racial/ethnic/cultural communities for queer POC. In semi-structured interview research conducted with LGBTQ+ Asian college students ranging from undergraduate students to PhD students, it was found that participants' openness about their LGBTQ+ identity and identity presentation was highly contextual, with situational, relational, and environmental variables all influencing decisions to disclose or conceal sexual orientation identity (Narui, 2011). Within the contexts of religion, home life, and certain settings within higher education such as the classrooms and Asian student organizations seemed to be settings with norms, experiences, or relationships that did not lend themselves to identity openness. For example, Christian participants or those with Christian friends often concealed their identity from their church community or religious friends due to perceptions that the community may not be accepting of queer identity and disclosing would incur social costs. In home contexts, there were reflections of cultural norms, pressure, and expectations to have families through heterosexual marriage, as well as to abide by religious doctrine. Within racial and ethnic student organizations, there was erasure of queerness or understood cultural taboos,

and some international students reflected lack of acceptance of their identity in their home countries. Participants experienced othering, with some reporting emphasizing one aspect of their identity over another depending on context, and one noting specifically feeling “like [I’m] separating myself from the Asian community by coming out” (Narui, 2011). This further emphasizes themes echoed throughout existing studies, including the present, of intersectional alienation, stemming from societal views of queer and Asian (or more broadly, POC) identities as mutually exclusive. Based on this research, LGBTQ+ and Asian identity seem to intertwine in ways that shape one’s identity exploration and sense of self, as do potential marginalization experiences within both Asian and LGBTQ+ spaces, which may yield various choices to embrace, suppress, present, or conceal certain aspects of identity in hopes of connecting or maintaining connection with specific others. Though conducted predominantly with East Asian participants, and religious views centering around Christianity, this raises questions of what similarities and differences may exist for South Asian participants and those who are also Christian or those who are Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Zoroastrian, come from other religious backgrounds, or are nonreligious. It also prompts questions of interconnectedness and connection to the self for LGBTQ+ Asian individuals.

Similar results were found among LGBTQ+ Asian Americans, with heterosexism in communities of color, race-related dating and relationship problems in the LGBTQ+ community, internalized heterosexism, and outness to the world significantly predicting psychological distress (Szymanski & Sung, 2010). Relatedly, experiences of disconnection in multiple life arenas was reflected among LGBTQ+ people of color during the construction of a microaggressions scale for this population (Balsam et al., 2011). This research captured themes such as distrust of white LGBTQ+ people or feeling misunderstood by them, tokenization of

their LGBTQ+ POC identity, colorblindness, disconnection from ones racial/ethnic community because of their LGBT identity, feelings of rejection, lack of role models with shared identity, sexual racism, and other similar themes, with Asian participants scoring higher than other racial groups on a relationship racism subscale. These findings again echo what has been found in other works, of queer POC experiencing disconnection from multiple social groups or areas of life, including from queer groups or within relationships as well as from racial, ethnic, and cultural communities, holding troubling indications for the freedom of queer POC, including queer South Asians, to access affirming, supportive connections with others with shared identities.

Questions of belonging and differential LGBTQ+ experience may also arise when thinking about queer South Asian Americans' relationships with their parents or relatives, family loyalty, and inherited cultural values or customs, given the possibility for cultural or religious values to skew towards traditional familial expectations such as heterosexual, child-bearing marriage within the same cultural and caste background as well as faith (Bacchus, 2017; Choudhury et al., 2009; Takhar, 2006). LGBTQ+ South Asians report lacking a sense of emotional support from their ethnic or religious communities or organizations, and broadly report feeling less supported specifically for their queer South Asian identity than more general, broad emotional support. Though many feel a sense of connection to the LGBTQ+ South Asian community, a large proportion also report loneliness, isolation, mental and behavioral health issues, and feelings of living a double life.

Connection with the LGBTQ+ community has been shown to be potentially helpful in mitigating relations between stigma and depression or suicidal behavior for LGBTQ+ individuals, such that those who feel greater connection to their LGBTQ+ community experience less depressed feelings in the face of stigma (Kaniuka et al., 2019). This has important

implications for the present study's examination of connection, in that, when taken alongside results from other studies showing queer South Asians' potential alienation from general LGBTQ+ communities, a lack of connection or exclusion from [often white-dominated] queer spaces may preclude queer POC including queer South Asians from reaping some of the potential benefits of establishing a sense of connection. Broadly, lack of connection with other LGBTQ+ people has also been found to help explain linkages between internalized heterosexism and psychological distress (Puckett, Levitt, Horne, & Hayes-Skelton, 2015). Again, this raises concerns in relation to this study's population of interest, given that findings point towards queer connections being healing, protective, and a source of potential wellbeing in the face of things like stigma, discrimination, and internalized sexism, while other findings indicate South Asian, Asian, and other LGBTQ+ people of color may experience factors that deter, discourage, or otherwise make these connections less accessible or rewarding.

Though research focusing specifically on South Asian LGBTQ+ people is still limited, existing research has identified that minority stressors such as experiences of heterosexist events, experiences of racist events, and internalized heterosexism are correlated with psychological distress (Sandil et al., 2015). This research has also revealed that outness may moderate the links between experiencing racist events and psychological distress, such that greater outness paired with frequent racist experiences was linked with greater levels of distress. Both external and internal stress processes have been implicated in distress experienced by LGBTQ+ people, providing a foundation for further research to expand upon in regards to the unique forms of minority stress, discrimination, and internalization experienced by South Asian LGBTQ+ people.

Guiding Theoretical Frameworks

The present research study was guided by minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), and Ching and colleagues' model of intersectional stress and trauma in Asian American sexual and gender minorities (2018). Based on these frameworks, it is understood that individuals with intersecting marginalized identities experience unique systemic oppression, stressors, stigma, and experiences of marginalization that are highly contextual. These unique cultural pressures and experiences of marginalization situate LGBTQ+ South Asians at a complex crossroads of identity, wherein they may experience heterosexist discrimination within South Asian communities and racist or cultural discrimination within white-dominated LGBTQ+ spaces; these kind of intersectional "othering" experiences may serve as barriers to connection with community (Balsam et al., 2011; Choudhury et al., 2009; Narui, 2011; Vaccaro & Koob, 2018).

Stemming from a meta-analysis of pre-existing research, including within- and between-group studies, exploring mental health disparities between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual people, Meyer (2003) constructed a framework of minority stress. Through the lens of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), we can better conceptualize the possible unique experience of LGBTQ+ South Asians. Minority stress theory posits that the unique stigma, prejudice, and discrimination endured by LGBTQ+ individuals contributes to their elevated distress and negative mental health outcomes as compared to heterosexual counterparts. Components of this framework illustrate how elements such as internalized homophobia, identity concealment, experience of prejudice, and other stressors, both internal and external, contribute to psychological distress (Meyer, 2003). This framework also makes mention of race, ethnicity, and gender as minority statuses that may overlap with sexual orientation identity and have the potential to produce particularly

isolating experiences of rejection from ones racial/ethnic and sexual orientation identity communities.

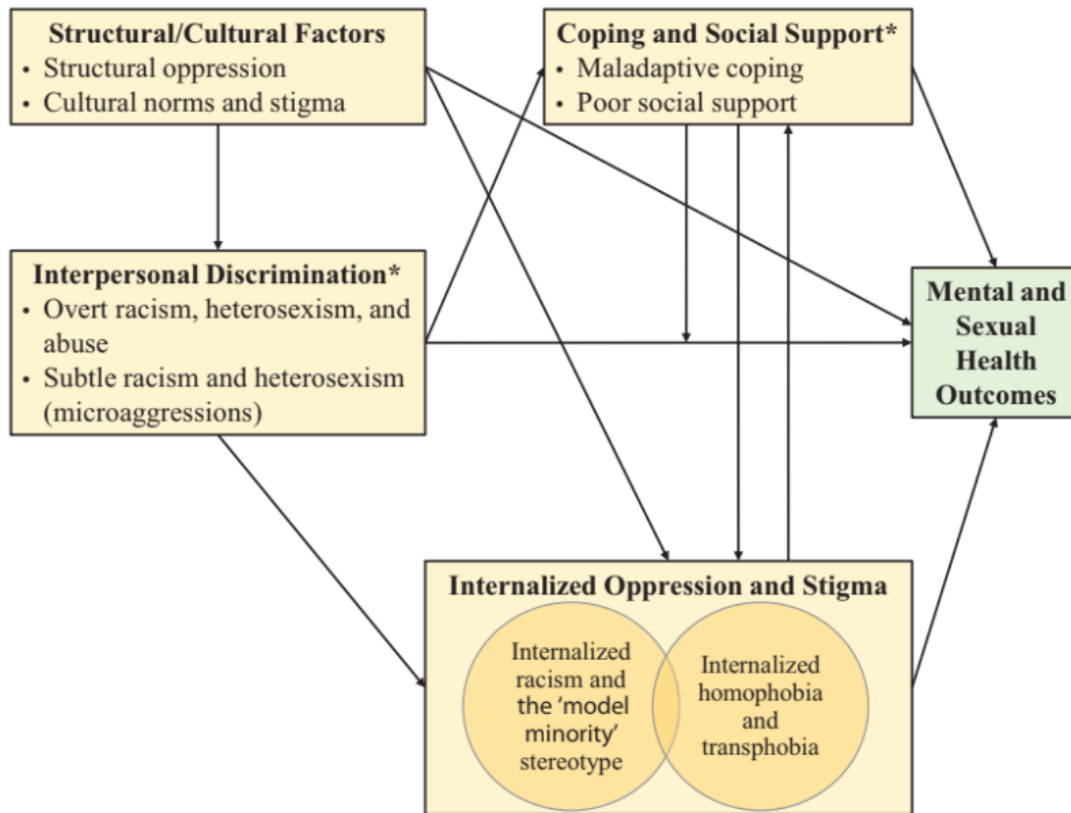
When coupled with the additional and intersecting stress of navigating the world as a second generation person of color, this LGBTQ+ minority stress may change, becoming amplified by certain situations or experiences as well as possibly ameliorated in other instances by certain protective factors. Here, intersectionality theory becomes particularly helpful. From Black feminist thought and the scholarly work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality theory highlights the ways in which interlocking systems of oppression operate to harm and disadvantage in ways that cannot be adequately captured by single-axis views of oppression. Intersectionality theory points out society's privileging of dominant views and predominantly unidimensional views of oppressive socio political forces, including racism and heterosexism in the case of this study's population of interest, which may result in ignoring the interplay of these systems of oppression for communities including Black women, or as the case for this study, South Asian LGBTQ+ communities. Similarly to how mainstream feminist movements have historically and often continue to center white women's experience as normative, to the exclusion of Black women as essentially separate from the general category of "women", mainstream LGBTQ+ narratives have often centered and situated white, gay, financially stable, cisgender men as the image of queerness to the exclusion of LGBTQ+ people of color (Battle, Pastrana, & Harris, 2017; Han, 2007; Hunter, 2010; Knee, 2018); in South Asian circles, this may even be reinforced by conceptions of queerness as belonging or existing only in white culture, as evidenced in previously-mentioned studies centering the layered intersectional alienation of queer Asians and treatment of their queerness as inherently not Asian. In similar ways, South Asian queer people may have their racial and sexual orientation identities

invalidated and delegitimized through being seen or treated as not “true” South Asians or not “prototypical” [white] queer people. Rather than focusing on individual identity markers as if they exist in a vacuum, an intersectional lens views identity and experience holistically, attending to the intersection where an individual’s every identity intertwines to form their whole self and the experiences that come with it, as they are shaped by social and political systems of power. For South Asian LGBTQ+ individuals, this intersectionality framework may help look beyond existing scholarship and conceptualizations of the separate experiences of LGBTQ+ people and the experiences of South Asian people to study where these identities and experiences intersect.

In alignment with intersectionality theory, Ching and colleagues built upon minority stress theory to propose a model of intersectional stress and trauma in LGBTQ+ Asian Americans (Figure 1) based on a review of the extant literature spanning over 45 years, which illustrates relationships between structural/cultural factors, interpersonal discrimination, internalized oppression and stigma, and coping/social support as they influence mental and sexual health outcomes (Ching et al., 2018). The model, which accounts for both additive and interactive intersectional stress and trauma, illuminates how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans’ health and wellbeing may be interconnected with unique intersectional stressors such as structural oppression, interpersonal discrimination, cultural norms or stigma, negative internalized cognitions, and inadequate social support.

Figure 1

Integrative Model of Intersectional Stress and Trauma for LGBTQ Asian Americans (Ching et al., 2018)



From this model stem questions of connection, specifically based on the roles social support (or lack thereof) and intersectional discrimination within diverse contexts may play in LGBTQ+ Asian Americans' wellbeing, such as their mental health outcomes. Given that LGBTQ+ people of color appeared to have diminished access to everyday forms of social support compared to white LGBTQ+ individuals and may be alienated in both their cultural and sexual orientation identity communities, it may be valuable to extend this literature by studying the experience of interconnectedness among various LGBTQ+ communities of color, such as

LGBTQ+ South Asian Americans. Furthermore, the question of LGBTQ+ South Asians' connection with themselves stems from the component highlighting internalized stigma and oppression, such as the internalization of racism, "model minority" myth ideology, and homophobia, given their linkages to self-blame, negative self-attitudes, identity concealment or disavowal, shame, poor self-esteem, risky health behaviors, and other forms of psychological and behavioral distress (Ching et al., 2018). This study involved contextualizing the components of this model, for example exploring the potential role of connection in coping with challenging cultural norms, stigma or interpersonal discrimination, and especially exploring an element similar and adjacent to social support (connection) in order to help understand how connection (or disconnection) with others and the self are experienced by this population. This study also sought to explore potential unique strengths of this community and joys of connection in the face of structural oppressions, interpersonal discrimination, internalized stigma and oppression (tapped into, in part, by questions of connection with the self), and ultimately aimed to unearth mental health and social wellbeing implications of the phenomenon of connection/disconnection in the lives of members of this community.

Gaps in the Literature

There are many scholars in the field who are presently, and have been, advancing work that centers the experiences of LGBTQ+, Asian, and South Asian communities. This includes work addressing queer South Asian identity, but there is much left to be explored in order to uplift the stories, needs, challenges, joys, and strengths of this community. Within the existing literature, there are some trends in terms of sampling that make generalizing results to the present population of interest challenging or inadvisable. For instance, many study samples are predominantly gay or lesbian (monosexual identities), with a much smaller subsection of

bisexual or pansexual participants, not to mention other queer orientations (Kaniuka et al., 2019; Narui, 2011; Puckett et al., 2015; Sandil et al., 2015) and often have samples who are nearly all cisgender. Additionally, many studies conducted with South Asians focus on first generation immigrants (Choudhury et al., 2009; Inman et al., 2014), leaving a need for additional research centered on second generation South Asians, particularly as this population's numbers are rapidly growing. Furthermore, many of these studies have a much higher proportion of Indian participants than other South Asian identities (Choudhury et al., 2009; Inman et al., 2014; Iwamoto et al., 2013), which may be a factor of demographics within the U.S. or specifically locations where research was conducted, but leaves a gap in terms of the exploration of the experiences of other South Asian ethnic subgroups, who each have their own unique cultures, norms, and experiences. Samples also tend to be highly educated, with many holding at least an undergraduate-level college degree (Choudhury et al., 2009; Puckett et al., 2015; Sandil et al., 2015; Takeda, 2017), which leaves out the unique stories of those who have either not attended or completed higher education; this may be a noteworthy gap, as oftentimes universities provide unique and plentiful opportunities for connection, through student organizations, networks, events, and more, that may not be as readily present in other contexts of life.

The broader LGBTQ+ research on connection and mental health shows promising effects of connection to the LGBTQ+ community in the face of stigma and discrimination, but sample demographics tend to skew predominantly white, with relatively few Asian participants (Kaniuka et al., 2019; Puckett et al., 2015), leaving a major gap in which Asian, and by extension South Asian, LGBTQ+ people have been overlooked. This leaves a gap this study aimed to address regarding how or whether these potential benefits of LGBTQ+ community connection seem to align qualitatively with queer South Asians' experiences. Generally, South Asians are

underrepresented within the broader Asian American research, which tends to focus more on East Asian participants, while the vast diversity within Asian American identities makes generalization of this research to South Asians challenging (Uba, 2003). There is a lack of research on LGBTQ+ people of color more generally and a significant lack of research on LGBTQ+ South Asian Americans within the broader related bodies of literature (Choudhury et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2010; Inman et al., 2014). Though there has been research conducted with queer Asians more broadly, oftentimes again samples are predominantly East Asian with relatively few South Asian participants (Narui, 2011; Szymanski & Sung, 2010; Takeda, 2017), and broader research with queer people of color often has a low proportion of Asian participants in general (Balsam et al., 2011), indicating a substantial gap in the literature attending to queer POC and queer Asian experiences that leaves a need for exploring queer South Asian experiences specifically, given cultural differences, nuances, and the diversity within the broader Asian and Asian American community.

Existing research has shown that broadly for queer POC (Balsam et al., 2011), queer Asians (Narui, 2011; Szymanski & Sung, 2010), and queer South Asians specifically (Choudhury et al., 2009; Inman et al., 2014; Sandil et al., 2015), there may be feelings of alienation for the intersections of their identity as well as a lack of connection or acceptance from multiple areas of life, such as feelings of rejection from racial, ethnic, and/or religious communities as well as LGBTQ+ circles. The present study aims to expand upon this research by further exploring, qualitatively, what connection and disconnection look like for this community, unique contexts of these experiences, and what impact feelings of connection or disconnection may have on the lives of queer South Asians. Given that much of the research in this and related domains has been quantitative, many studies of which had aforementioned low sample

proportions of Asian or specifically South Asian participants, this research aimed to highlight the direct and detailed narratives of queer South Asians in order to illuminate how this group pursues and experiences connection, contextual factors that influence that experiencing, and broadly what connection means for members of this population. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was deemed most fitting to achieve the broad aims of helping to bolster the small pool of existing LGBTQ+ South Asian literature, capturing the authentic lived experiences of this population through direct conversation with individuals in the community, and creating a foundation for further work attending to the intersection of these identities. Given the relatively sparse literature focusing specifically on LGBTQ+ South Asians, this study mainly aimed to be more inductive, building a base of knowledge about the intersectional experiences of this population with regards to the phenomenon of connection. This phenomenon rises out of the above literature on marginalization, alienation, and disconnecting experiences faced by queer Asians, both within cultural/ethnic and queer spaces, as well as the literature indicating the potentially beneficial nature of connection for LGBTQ+ people. Based on the aforementioned mental health consequences of minority stress, discrimination, stigma, internalized heterosexism, disconnection, and alienation within various life contexts, as well as potential positive and uplifting aspects of finding and building connection, this appears to be a crucial area of study that can ideally be used in ways to help inform and advance research, support services, and community-building for this population.

Method

Design

This study was conducted as a qualitative, interview-based phenomenological study. A phenomenological approach was selected due to its focus on studying and communicating the

essence of participants' lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants who fit the criteria outlined below were recruited through a variety of online networks. Demographic and screening data were collected via Qualtrics, and qualifying participants were contacted via email with an invitation to schedule an interview. Subsequently, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants via Zoom utilizing a bank of questions inspired by the existing literature which aimed to tap into participants' experiences of connection and disconnection as relating to their intersecting identities.

Participants

In order to be eligible for participation in this study, participants needed to identify as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer), South Asian, second generation (born in the U.S. and having at least one parent who immigrated here), over the age of 18, and needed to be currently residing in the U.S. Typically, definitions of South Asian identity include individuals with heritage tracing back to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, with some definitions also including Afghanistan and Myanmar as well (SAALT, 2019; University of Illinois Library, n.d.). However, given the lack of a fully concrete and agreed-upon definition of what cultures are considered South Asian, all participants who self-identified with the term were considered. More detailed demographic information and self-description of identity was collected within the Qualtrics screening survey. Other demographic information collected included age, gender, sexual orientation identity, religion (both personal and familial/upbringing), generational status, educational status, and subjective socioeconomic status (presently and while growing up). General locations were also recorded by the Qualtrics survey.

In total, the screening and demographics Qualtrics survey received 32 responses. Out of these, six responses were excluded either because they did not meet all aspects of the screening criteria or due to survey noncompletion. Of the participants who were eligible and contacted via email for recruitment, a total of 16 scheduled and completed Zoom interviews. Of participants who completed individual interviews, one participant's data later needed to be excluded from analysis due to being from outside of the U.S. and having been raised in a non-U.S. context. This left a total of 15 participant interviews that were transcribed and included in data analysis.

Participant demographics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	n
Gender	
Nonbinary	6
Nonbinary woman	2
Nonbinary transmasculine	1
Cisgender woman	5
Cisgender man	1
Sexual orientation identity	
Queer	8
Lesbian	5
Bisexual	5
Pansexual	3
Asexual	1

Ethnicity

Indian	12
South Indian	4
Tamil Indian	2
North Indian	1
Pakistani	3
Persian	1
Bangladeshi	1
Multiracial/multiethnic	4

Current religion/spirituality

Spiritual	7
Hindu	5
Muslim	4
Christian	1
Atheist	2
Agnostic	2
Nonreligious	1

Upbringing religion/spirituality

Spiritual	2
Hindu	8
Muslim	5
Christian	1
Jewish	1

Atheist	2
Agnostic	2
Highest level of education	
Some college	9
Bachelor's degree	4
Some graduate school	1
Doctoral-level degree	1
Current income status	
Upper income	4
Middle income	7
Lower income	4
Income status growing up	
Upper income	6
Middle income	6
Lower income	2
Unsure	1
Geographic location	
DMV (DC, MD, VA)	10
California	2
New York	1
Texas	1
Utah	1

Demographic data from 15 interviewees, ages 19-35 (M=24).

Note: Table reflects sample demographics at time of interview. In cases of discrepancies between participants' Qualtrics responses and self-reported identities during interviews, interview data were treated as reflective of participants' most current understandings of themselves.

Participants' identities may have since shifted or evolved.

Totals of several of the demographic items may sum to more than 15, as participants were able to select multiple options as well as self-describe; this was specifically the case for gender, sexual orientation identity, ethnicity, and religion. It is important to note that a number of participants expressed gender fluidity or uncertainty at the time of interview, so it is challenging to fully encapsulate the gender diversity of this sample with the limited terminology and labels available. These were participants' indications at the time of interview and have since may shifted. In the few circumstances wherein there were discrepancies or conflicts between participants' Qualtrics demographic data and their self-reported identity during interviews, data collected during the interview were treated as superseding previously-reported information, given that these interview self-reports reflected participants' most current understandings of themselves.

Recruiting participants from this sample did not prove as challenging as anticipated, and was in fact more constrained simply by limited funds for participant compensation as well as lack of schedule availability for some eligible respondents. However, it is important to note that it is still possible that cultural stigma and the intimate personal nature of this study subject may have dissuaded some people from participating. Potential participants may have had fears relating to confidentiality or somehow being outed through their participation or may have had hesitations about discussing their queer identity with another member of their cultural

community, which may have suppressed response numbers. These concerns were presumably partially quelled through stringent confidentiality measures, holding interviews one-on-one over Zoom using private unique individual links rather than in groups or in person (also allowing for greater accessibility nationwide), and storing recordings in a secure Box folder.

Measures

Prior to each individual interview, screening information demographic data was collected via a Qualtrics survey. For the purposes of linking this data to interview recordings, this information was not deidentified in the same way that is typical for qualitative research, retaining participant names on the Qualtrics responses. However, this information remained in the researcher's password-protected, Qualtrics account and was not exported. This demographic questionnaire asked participants about their age, racial and ethnic background, sexual orientation identity, gender identity, highest level of educational attainment, religious/spiritual affiliation (both current and familial/upbringing), and subjective rating of socioeconomic status (both current and while growing up). General locations were also recorded by the Qualtrics survey.

Each interview opened with informal, personal introductions during which the researcher shared her positionality and background as a queer, multiracial Pakistani, Muslim cisgender woman and invited the participants to do the same. This also served as a method for confirming or gathering more current demographic and identity-related information about each participant. The researcher also provided a description of the project's purpose and offered a brief overview of themes within existing literature that point towards connection and belonging as important factors within queer communities of color when it comes to the relationships and psychological wellbeing.

Below is the bank of interview questions that were utilized, though time constraints of and the semi-structured nature of interviews produced some divergence from these questions in the form of cutting out questions when time required (rarely) or asking related follow-up questions to encourage elaboration from interviewees. Additionally, throughout the process as similar themes began to emerge, the interviewed sometimes incorporated additional questions if relevant (time permitting) to gather additional data and perspective on these emerging commonalities.

Interview Questions:

1. How would you define connection/what does connection mean to you?
2. As a [LGBTQ+ South Asian], can you reflect on some ways you experience connection in your life?
 - a. What about ways you've experienced disconnection or a lack of connection?
3. How has the intersection of your [LGBTQ+] and [South Asian] identities shaped your experiences of connection?
 - a. How has your identity shaped your connections with others?
 - b. In what ways has your identity shaped your connection with yourself?
4. How have the intersection of your identities influenced any experiences of discrimination you may have faced?
5. How have these experiences of connection and/or disconnection shaped you as a person?
6. What sources of strength and resilience have you found?
7. What is something you love about being [LGBTQ+] and South Asian?
8. What email would you like me to send the \$15 Amazon gift card to?

These questions were developed from a combination of the existing literature, consultation with community members, friends, and colleagues who share these intersecting identities, as well as the researcher's own lived experience and observations. They were further developed, refined, and edited based on consultation with area experts and additional community members to ensure their relevance, fit, and understandability.

One aspect that this study aimed to capture is the less conventionally studied positive perspective of queer research. Often when LGBTQ+ communities, South Asian communities, or specifically queer people of color are discussed or researched, discourse skews towards the negative, addressing valid and highly relevant concerns of marginalization, oppression, and stigmatization, particularly in the current sociopolitical climate. While these themes undoubtedly emerged in interviews, it is equally important that this research explored connection, resilience factors, joy, and self-love within this community. It is the researcher's stance that seeing the community's positive narratives represented in research or education is an important piece of helping community members reclaim or reaffirm positive queer South Asian identity and help younger members of the community or those who are just stepping into their identity believe in the possibility of a rich, fulfilling life. This sentiment was also echoed by participants throughout the interview process.

Personal Statement of Positionality

As both the primary researcher and as a member of the community with whom this research was conducted, I would like to be transparent in sharing my positionality and personal connection to this topic of study. In conducting my research, I have deeply valued the ability to connect with and come to know study participants, as much as they are willing to let me. I also firmly believe in the reciprocity of connection and the importance of allowing study participants

and readers to know me. After all, as articulated by so many within this study, interpersonal connections run both ways. As echoed through the personal stories and feedback shared by interviewees within this study, queer South Asian representation is vitally important, not only in the media we consume and the social spaces we navigate, but within the world of research as well. To that end, I would like to acknowledge my perspective as being shaped by my own identity as a queer, second-generation, cisgender woman of multiracial Pakistani, Irish, and Italian descent who was raised Muslim. I entered this research with the hopes of hearing and highlighting others' stories of connection within our community, including from those who likely experience marginalization differently and often more intensely than I do. Specifically, as a mixed-race person who is often perceived as racially ambiguous or solely white depending on my surrounding context, and someone whose queer identity is not always easily perceptible ("concealable"), I acknowledge that my experiences (and lack of experiences) with racism, colorism, and heterosexism will likely differ substantially from participants whose South Asian and/or queer identities are more visible.

Procedures

Volunteer participants were incentivized with a \$15 Amazon gift card. Participants were recruited via a blend of social media outreach, targeted outreach to LGBTQ+, South Asian, and intersectional affinity groups, and through chains of social connections (others in the community spreading the word). Specific groups that were recruited from included organizations at an Ivy League university in the northeast U.S., including the South Asian Council, the LGBTQ+ student union, an affinity group for LGBTQ+ APIDA (Asian Pacific Islander Desi American) students, and an organization for QTPOC (queer and trans people of color). Additionally, outreach was done for groups at a public university in the Mid-atlantic U.S. including the South Asian Student

Association, the LGBTQ+ Equity Center, Pride Alliance, an affinity group for LGBTQ+ Asians, an LGBTQ+ graduate student group, and a South Asian queer and trans GroupMe the researcher was added to following a panel featuring LGBTQ+ South Asians. To further expand and diversify the participant pool, the researcher contacted organizations and networks outside of a university context, including a local DMV (DC, Maryland, and Virginia) group for the South Asian LGBTQ+ community, local DMV group for LGBTQ+ Asians, the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, South Asian Mental Health Consortium, and the Queer South Asian National Network. The researcher had some level of personal connection or familiarity to varying degrees with most, but not all, of these groups. Many of the groups assisted in disseminating recruitment materials, which included the link to the Qualtrics screening and demographics survey. Some interview participants also reported having heard about the study from peers by word of mouth and indicated that they would spread the word to their own social networks.

Prior to interview participation, individuals were required to respond to the Qualtrics screening and demographics survey to determine eligibility. This survey also contained informed consent information, as did the scheduling emails sent to eligible participants. Semi-structured interview questions were constructed, guided by the existing literature and consultation with community members, and approximately 1-hour individual interviews were conducted with eligible participants who responded affirmatively when invited. With participants' informed consent, Zoom interviews were video and audiotaped, and written transcripts of interviews were produced, then cross-checked with recordings and edited in detail for accuracy. These transcripts were reviewed by the researcher in an ongoing process in order to engage in memoing, identify any emerging themes, and assess whether a point of saturation was being approached, all of

which informed recruitment efforts and helped the researcher gauge when to stop data collection. Additionally, to address issues of reliability, a process of data auditing was conducted by the researcher's advisor, a PhD-level faculty member and researcher in Counseling Psychology.

Results

This study was granted IRB approval for human subjects research through the researcher's institution. As stated earlier, the study's aim was to explore how second generation South Asian LGBTQ+ people define, experience, and value connection, as well as tap into their unique lived experiences at the intersection of these identities. It was decided that, given the area of LGBTQ+ South Asian research is still relatively sparse, a qualitative research design would be ideal to allow for broader as well as deeper exploration of the topic. An individual virtual interview based approach was selected for multiple reasons. Firstly, conducting interviews virtually allowed for accessibility to a wider geographical range of participants as well as avoided the logistics of arranging in-person meetings for interviews, which could have placed burden on those without transportation, would have created logistic difficulties of securing a private space, and may have posed greater risk to participant confidentiality. Relatedly, one-on-one interviews were selected over the possibility of group interviews due to the deeply personal and sometimes sensitive nature of interview material in order to put participants most at ease and ensure confidentiality as best as possible.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological approach was deemed most appropriate for this study, given the target sample size, the individual in-depth semi-structured interview modality, and the primary focus on participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological research utilizes a very manageable sample size, wherein the researcher had the capacity to dedicate

sufficient time and attention to each interviewee as well as build a trusting personal rapport with each individual. It allowed for in-depth attention and analysis of their unique stories and experiences, without risking important elements getting lost in a sea of data. Specifically, data was analyzed through a process of interpretive phenomenological analysis. An interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) was selected for its emphasis on sense-making of participants' experiences and the ideal of analysis remaining as close to the lived experience as possible (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA entails analysis of each individual participant before identifying areas of convergence and divergence, which was valuable for its deep attention to the entirety of every interviewee's own experience. At its essence, IPA involves the researcher engaging in a process of sense-making in response to material yielded by participants' attempts to make sense of the phenomenon in question.

Though some approaches to phenomenological analysis emphasize complete bracketing of the researcher's own experience and identity, as a member of the community who shares similar identity characteristics, experiences, and background with many of the participants, the researcher's perspective and positionality is inseparably intertwined with the process of connecting with participants, conducting interviews, and the lens through which data is analyzed. Given the researcher's place within the community, it seemed difficult if not a disservice to divorce the self from the data and refrain from interpretation. It seemed counterintuitive to, in a study on this community's experience of connection, disconnect the self from the data and findings. Furthermore, IPA places emphasis on context and acknowledges that universality will not exist for any experienced phenomenon; assuming it does - a potential pitfall of a descriptivist approach - could risk contributing to the further homogenization of Asian American communities, an already prevalent issue in research and broader society.

Emphasis was placed on reaching a point of saturation with the data. Through a process of periodic review of interview transcripts while the interview process was ongoing, themes and commonalities across participant narratives began to emerge, which served as a cue for beginning to slow down participant recruitment. Beginning in the early stages of interviews and continuing throughout, the interviewer engaged in a process of reviewing transcripts and recording broad exploratory notes regarding interview content and process. From these notes, experiential statements were then able to be drawn up for each participant. In order to ensure analysis did not too vastly diverge from interviewees' original statements, specific quotes were highlighted to illustrate these experiential statements. Once experiential statements had been created for the totality of an interview transcript, the researcher was then able to identify connections throughout and begin clustering these statements into broader theme groupings. Personal experiential themes were identified and compiled for each individual interview participant. All of this was done for each individual participant prior to engaging in cross-case analysis, in which participants' interview content and experiential themes were able to come into conversation with one another. It was through these dialogues between data that similarities and differences of experience across the sample began to emerge. The researcher then aimed to construct rich, detailed descriptions to contextualize participants' convergent and divergent experiences as well as to explore the meanings ascribed to those experiences by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness of Data

A number of measures were taken while conducting this study to bolster the trustworthiness of the data. Firstly, the approach to data analysis involved a process of data auditing and spot reviews, conducted by the researcher's advisor. This involved the sharing of

annotated transcripts, themes, and excerpted quotes with the auditor for overview in order to lessen potential issues of subjectivity and researcher bias as well as to enhance validity by determining the researcher's analysis was suitably in alignment with the original data. This process also served to ensure the researcher's process was sound and following conventions of research within the field. Additionally, throughout the planning, interview, and analysis processes, the researcher engaged in memo-ing, focusing on her own process and reactions through continuous review. The researcher reflected throughout the coding process to self-monitor and guard against imposing her own assumptions or biases onto the data. During the generation of individual and group experiential themes, the researcher consistently returned to the original interview transcripts to ensure the themes were based in the original data.

To help validate the results and do justice to telling the participants' stories, any sections quoting or referencing material from individual participants was sent to them for review and correction before the submission of any form of publication (e.g. to check if they feel they have been misrepresented at all or have concerns around recognizability of their data). Additionally, a related important component was that the interviewer made an effort to develop a sense of trust and rapport with participants, as well as to minimize power dynamics that may exist in individual interview research settings through engaging in ways that felt genuine and authentic, adopting an attitude of warmth, and responding empathically to participants' vulnerability in sharing their personal narratives.

Major Themes and Subthemes

The process of data analysis revealed the following major themes and subthemes relating to and stemming from the topic of connection within the lives of second generation LGBTQ+ South Asians.

Figure 2*Group Experiential Themes*

1. Interpersonal Connections & Context	2. Intrapersonal Connection	3. Indirect Connection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1a. Connection in affinity spaces and unique value of queer South Asian connection • 1b. Connection with family • 1c. Connection with strangers and temporary connections • 1d. Coming out and connection • 1e. Role of stereotypes • 1f. Disconnection as a form of self-protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2a. Identity fragmentation, concealment, and assimilation • 2b. Early internalization of white ideals • 2c. Self-determination and divergence from prescribed expectations • 2d. Self-connection and nurturance through spirituality, self-care, and meaning-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3a. Media and social media • 3b. Dating app experiences • 3c. Visibility and leadership • 3d. (Re)connection to culture, customs, and history

Interpersonal Connections and Context

When asked how they might define connection, many participants first gravitated towards defining and discussing it within the context of interpersonal relationships, noting components like shared experiences, common ground, shared values/beliefs, mutual understanding, and enjoyment of time together. They also described connection as a spectrum and highly contextual, depending on the type of relationship, interaction, or identity characteristics. Many participants went on to make distinctions between their connections and dynamics that influence them within the contexts of affinity spaces, family relationships, connections with strangers, connection in dating, coming out experiences, and the role of stereotypes in influencing these connections.

Connection in Affinity Spaces and Unique Value of Queer South Asian Connection.

Participants broadly expressed finding value and connection in their connections with other people of color, other LGBTQ+ people, and other LGBTQ+ people of color specifically, but many also expressed difficulties to connect within these relational contexts as well. A

number of interviewees shared that their friend groups have grown more diverse over time and reflected that they primarily gravitate towards other people of color, oftentimes other queer people of color. However, opportunities for these connections are sometimes limited, and connections with white LGBTQ+ peers was described as somewhat of a gamble by participants. Some spoke of feeling othered in affinity spaces, for example, GS who reported feeling “like an odd creature” in white-dominated queer spaces due to looking different and not feeling “queer enough” and YR who felt their culturally-informed perspectives on gender were not well received sometimes in white-dominated trans spaces. Participants reported feeling, at times, the need to censor or explain themselves or their identity in non-intersectional spaces. Some multiracial participants indicated additional difficulty and discomfort navigating some of these spaces, reflecting on experiences of “othering”, assumptions being made about their identity, or being treated as “not enough” to belong in the space.

The vast majority of participants highlighted that connecting with other LGBTQ+ South Asians specifically, whether through affinity spaces or individually/informally, feels uniquely relaxing, affirming, fulfilling, and healing. Interviewees spoke about the feeling of relief at recognizing they were “not alone” or “not the only one” upon forging connections with other LGBTQ+ South Asians. Particularly for participants who grew up in predominantly white environments and attended predominantly white educational institutions, there was a feeling of isolation, both racially as well as oftentimes for their sexual orientation identity, with limited visibility of others like them. Having opportunities to connect to other queer South Asians was described as a “game-changer” that allowed for a deeper sense of understanding, often through shared experiences or backgrounds.

Connection with Family.

Family relationships were another extremely common and impactful area of discussion when it comes to connection. Interviewees had a range of experiences and quality of family connections, particularly in relation to participants' outness as LGBTQ+. While some participants suffered shunning, disownment, or hostility from family upon coming out, others were met with support and validation. Many others' stories fell somewhere in the middle, with parents and family members exhibiting a range of reactions or gradually improving over time. One participant reflected on her positive coming out experience with her parents as having strengthened their sense of connection to each other:

***SK:** You know, in some ways, I probably was able to come out to them [parents] because we had a strong connection and I didn't feel like I was risking, you know, losing kind of the shared love there. But also in some ways, I think that coming out and kind of over time talking to them more about it also made that connection stronger.*

Not all participants experienced this kind of emotional security with parents, and some reported deep rejection, being kicked out or running away from home, or even being subjected to efforts to “change” them (e.g. conversion therapy, religious interventions), which produced intense feelings of disconnection from family, even among those who had indicated having had a previously strong sense of familial connection.

Similarly, some interviewees raised the concept of “found family” prevalent in the community, and highlighted both the joys and value of this as well as the potential cultural clash with Asian values of filial piety.

***NR:** And I think, like, in the same sense, you know, queer people, like, we have a whole chosen family and all of that and everything... But I think in general, the intersection of*

those ideas is somewhat hypocritical almost sometimes because with queer people, you know, it's like "Screw your family, they don't matter. None of it matters." But with your family, it's like, I've literally had my parents senior year of high school, "Why do you hang out with your friends so much? Your family are the only people that will be there for you. Your friends don't care about you." And I'm like, "Okay, so I don't know who I'm supposed to go with right now."

This was just one way in which participants identified possible disconnect between more Western/Eurocentric queer culture and South Asian cultural norms that have the potential to make queer South Asians feel torn or alienated. Cultural and language barriers were also noted in relation to generational clashes and disconnect from extended family, with these compounding differences making it challenging to even discuss queerness.

A related theme that arose in regards to family connection and possible culture clash was lack of communication around relationships, dating, and sexuality, whereas these topics were seen by participants as far more prevalent in U.S. society. Some participants felt that this lack of communication or openness to discuss relationships reinforced assumed heteronormative relationship/life trajectories and left room for uncertainty about where their parents stood in regards to queerness. One participant shared specifically how this lack of communication contributed to stress and anxiety about possible parental responses to her sexual orientation identity.

TA: Growing up, I was really stressed about what my immediate family would think of my sexuality and I just ended up assuming, most of the time, that I knew what they would think and that it would be negative, so I think that caused me a lot of problems where if I'd just been able to communicate or if they communicated to me that they weren't

homophobic or anything like that, that would have saved me a lot of trouble... but I didn't know. I just went off of stereotypes about people from my religion and from my ethnicity.

In the absence of explicit communication of allyship from her parents, TA's assumptions and fears were left to be colored by internalized stereotypes from dominant narratives that paint South Asian cultural and religious communities as inherently homophobic.

Connection with Strangers and Temporary Connections.

In addition to ingrained relationships such as those with family, participants expressed that transient, temporary, and acquaintance or stranger relationships still hold value. Some noted that these brief interactions help broaden their perspectives through meeting a variety of different people who hold different identities. Others expressed that shared identities or experiences produce a sense of connection for them to strangers within the community, instilling a desire to support and be there for them. Often this stemmed in part from the necessity of solidarity within the LGBTQ+ community for purposes of safety. Participant VA articulated that they had various experiences both of providing and receiving support through connection with others in the LGBTQ+ community during times of need, for example, assisting a queer stranger find housing in another state when their living situation became unstable. Others described momentary or stranger-connections as bittersweet, noting there is some sadness in impermanence, but expressing gratitude for what they've gained from each transient relationship, however brief.

Coming Out and Connection.

As mentioned earlier within the context of family, outness and coming out had significant impacts on interpersonal relationships for many participants, both good and bad. AT referred to the broken familial relationships and immediate disconnect he experienced as a "casualty" of his

coming out. Others still had more positive experiences, for instance reflecting that upon coming out, friends sought to support, understand, and educate themselves about the participant's identity.

Role of Stereotypes.

As briefly touched upon earlier in TA's story about assuming her parents would be homophobic, stereotypes about racial, ethnic, and religious communities' stance on queer rights has the potential to produce disconnection and alienation for queer South Asians in a multitude of ways. For instance, N reflected on the following hurtful experience of disconnect with some of their white peers in high school.

N: "Gay people hate Muslim people. Muslim people hate gay people." It's like you've got nowhere to go and I explicitly remember I had this one friend group in high school and they were all white people. This was my freshman year of high school, so it was a lot different after that, but they were all white and I wasn't out to them at the time. I knew I was queer, but I wasn't out as a queer person. This entire story is just so weird because it is just uncomfortable. I walked in on my two friends in the bathroom crying because one of them had come out as gay and they were afraid to tell me. I mean, they thought that I would have a viscerally bad reaction towards it. And I was never super religious... there was never anything I had done to lay that as the precedent of "You need to be afraid of coming out to me."

A similar story of stereotypes, assumptions, and misconceptions was shared by TA, but rather than with white peers, this incident occurred with a peer of similar background:

TA: My old roommate, for example, when I first met her, she was a hijabi, and I remember I was on a Facetime call or something with her because I was trying to find a roommate ... I really liked her, we seemed to get along. We had a lot of common interests, but she was a hijabi, and so I was kind of worried that she would be not accepting of my queerness, and so I remember I asked these really... I think I just asked certain questions that were not as upfront. But then I think she ended up asking me straight up, “What is your stance on homosexuality?” or something, and then she was like, “because I'm bi and like, I don't want to be with a homophobic person.”

Both N and TA’s experiences with peers were influenced by incorrect and harmful stereotypes about their identity groups. TA’s story especially illustrates how these stereotypes can be internalized to the point of even impacting how members of a shared community interact with one another and hesitancy to connect due to possibly inaccurate assumptions about each other’s values. This hesitancy and mistrust within the community can risk hindering queer South Asian connection.

Disconnection as a Form of Self-Protection.

Based on prior experiences of mistrust, prejudice, stereotyping, or similar harm within interpersonal relationships, some participants noted engaging in disconnection as a form of self-protection. For some, this was based on past trauma or patterns of disconnection throughout earlier life.

N: I've gotten into self-isolating behaviors, but I feel like with the lack of connection that I've experienced in my life, it's just safer to kind of put myself in a bubble.

This disconnection was conscious and intentional for some, with some participants referring to healthy boundary setting and others referring to conscious avoidance of certain relationships. Still others experienced this disconnection as instinctive and unconscious, occurring almost automatically, and some expressed desire or active work toward changing these patterns.

Intrapersonal Connection

Other major themes arising from the discussion of connection centered around intrapersonal connection and participants' sense of self.

Identity Fragmentation, Concealment, and Assimilation.

Numerous participants shared stories stretching back to their childhoods of feeling fragmented, or feeling the need to discard or disconnect from select aspects of their multifaceted identities. For instance, oftentimes participants, upon beginning to recognize their own queer identity, felt the initial pressure to suppress or conceal this, informed by societal concepts of queer identities as incompatible with their racial, cultural, and/or religious backgrounds. Participants such as YR also spoke about pressures to conform, tailor themselves, or act as a shapeshifter in order to meet the expectations of each varying context they found themselves in.

YR: Being disconnected from specifically brown communities or trans communities and queer communities, it very much makes you lonely. It makes you really lonely to be like, "I don't fit in there and I don't fit in there. If I go to this space, then this part of my identity is excluded. But if I go to this space, another part of my identity is excluded", and it makes you go kind of back and forth of like, "What part of me is palatable to what community?" And when you dissect yourself like that, it doesn't... It doesn't end well. It never usually does. When you do finally meet a lot of people that can connect with every

part of your identity, it's a breath of fresh air. It's like I don't have to meticulously recraft my perception of myself for this interaction.

One can imagine such a strenuous internal process of navigating decisions about self-presentation and identity concealment confers a massive cognitive burden upon LGBTQ+ South Asians who feel this pressure. Furthermore, participants spoke about persisting negative ramifications of this identity fragmentation in childhood well into their adult lives, in the forms of an uncertain sense of self, disconnection from their identities/selves, and continued anxiety about managing decisions surrounding self-presentation. For instance, NR's experience offers insight into potential long-lasting effects of having to adapt one's personality constantly to be able to connect with the environments and contexts they find themselves in.

NR: I feel like my personality is just a combination of everyone I've ever talked to in my life, which is fair to a certain extent because people shape us, people leave impressions. But in my head I'm like, they're not leaving impressions. They're the whole palette. I don't know where I am on the palette. It is all them and none of me, and I don't really know what me is at the end of the day, because I'm so used to shaping myself for everyone around me.

In these words, there seems to be almost a sense of loss or continued disconnection from the self, after years of having to camouflage or reconfigure in order to gain acceptance. Other participants spoke openly about mental health and trauma, some that stemmed from harm related to their intersecting identities, which contributed to a fractured, disconnected sense of self.

N: My connection with myself is like... I wouldn't even know where to start describing what that's like. I currently struggle with BPD, which is a pretty harsh diagnosis, and a

lot of that has to do with not having a sense of self or a core identity that you can feel. I'm sure I have one, but I have no clue what it is. I think of all the factors like culturally that have... because there are a set of symptoms that define you as an individual with BPD, a set of traumas. And I think of how my queerness and how my brownness, both of those things had kind of led into things that I feel brought on my BPD.

Early Internalization of White Ideals.

Relatedly to self-image and self-presentation, a subset of participants referenced having internalized and absorbed white ideals or Western beauty standards in childhood, particularly those who grew up in predominantly white environments. Participant AK reflected on a key memory of striving for Eurocentric beauty ideals as well as the insight and growth she was able to achieve moving forward from that point.

AK: I remember as a kid I even went so far as to... in Princess Diaries, she goes through like the princess routine and I did that step by step. I'm going to be honest with you. Like, I had the hand fans, I did the books on my head and everything. . . I don't think I would have learned who I was like here and now if I didn't have to go through all of those different experiences before. Like if I wasn't imitating The Princess Diaries, I would have never realized that maybe I don't want to be like a completely "normal" white American.

This snapshot highlights the pervasive narrative that white Americans are the default, a narrative which many participants say they had absorbed in childhood. Additionally, other participants spoke about the prevalence of white-dominated images of queerness or gender presentation, contributing to the initial internalization of white-centric, heteronormative and cisnormative ideals at the outset of their queer identity exploration.

Self-Determination and Divergence from Prescribed Expectations.

Many participants expressed having been brought up with familial, cultural, religious, and societally imposed heteronormative expectations of what life should look like for them. In particular, this point was raised in relation to weddings, which seemed to be emotionally-charged or especially frustrating events for some.

GS: I recently went to a family friend's wedding, and that was so funny because it was like a traditional Hindu wedding. So it's like very like heteronormative to like the extreme, right? They're very gendered roles . . . Those were the expectations I had for myself as a child, was that naturally I will get married at age 27, like my mom and have a traditional Hindu wedding. These were all the checkboxes that I feel like I was raised to have. And this was a reminder of, "remember those checkboxes? You've checked none of them", but you also aren't aiming to...It's simultaneously freeing and also frightening because there's a certain comfort in checkboxes because then you always know if you're on track or not. Whereas now it's kind of like my whole life is like an empty canvas.

Despite the frustration with a culturally imposed life path, participants including GS were also able to identify some degree of freedom and relief in allowing themselves to diverge from this path. In a similar vein, many participants were able to find a silver lining to the generally negative phenomenon of limited representation and even erasure of queer South Asian identities. Specifically, participants noted that because there is no "blueprint" or "template" of South Asian queerness, they feel greater freedom and agency to craft their own self-image and live authentically.

ST: There's almost more freedom to do things without having a set standard for what it has to look like, which I think is something that I feel in queer white spaces ...for queer

Desis, there are so many like nebulous ways in which people come to understand themselves that it makes it uniquely special.

This divergence from the heteronormative prescribed life path allows for greater creativity and flexibility in crafting and relating to the self. It is also, as it seems from many participants' statements, a freeing feeling to remove oneself from the boxes and binaries others may aim to place us in.

Interviewer: *My last question that I have for you is what is something that you love about being queer and South-Asian?*

EA: *I think just the limitless possibilities. It's a very creative position to be in. I feel... boundless, you know? Binary-less.*

Self-Connection & Nurturance through Spirituality, Self-Care, & Meaning-Making.

A substantial number of participants identified engaging in introspective, spiritual, self-help, and self-care practices, as well as therapy in order to better know and grow themselves. One quote in particular that illustrates the power for healing a fractured relationship with oneself or fostering a deeper connection with the self comes from participant RG:

RG: *Realizing that I'm on the same side as myself was kind of what brought me back together. It's weird, when I talk to myself or journal, I say "we" because there's a me and there's maybe my alter ego or my inner child or something. But there's always "we." It's not just "I."*

This speaks to the value of finding ways to be in solidarity with oneself and engage in practices that help foster or re-grow that connection, which in previous themes was shown to often be fractured during childhood by continuous pressure to disconnect from different pieces of

ones queer South Asian identity. Similar self-care and self-relation practices may be helpful in reintegrating these pieces of identity and regaining a sense of wholeness.

Indirect Connection

Media and Social Media.

As a subset of participants grew up in less diverse environments, many of them reported actively seeking community out in online spaces, sometimes indirectly through curating their social media feeds by following queer South Asian people or more directly, as was the case for AT below:

AT: I basically used MySpace, I was like [mimes typing] "gay, Indian", you know, whatever the options were, I basically distilled down and there was a one kid in New York City ...Literally one kid in New York City.

Interviewer: When you saw that on MySpace, right, when you filtered through and you saw that one person pop up. How did you feel seeing that?

AT: I felt like I wasn't crazy. I felt like this whole idea of ... "there's no such thing as an Indian gay person or a Pakistani gay person" just made no sense to me because I'm like, "I'm one." I mean, so there's at least one, right?

Outside of social media, many others referenced the role of popular media such as books, movies, music, podcasts, and television in facilitating a sense of queer South Asian connection. For instance, ST identified consumption of queer South Asian media as an opportunity for almost practicing connections and gaining a deeper sense of self:

*ST: I would listen to podcasts and just look at all the books I was shelving, and I really liked that because it was like a place for me to have solitude, but be able to feel connected to people at the same time. There's that podcast *Queering Desi* ... It was really helpful for me to learn how to feel connections without having social pressure of literally being around other people, because I think that helped me slow down and better understand who I am as an individual.*

Participant AB identified books, music and other popular queer media as useful tools to help facilitate queer connections, as well as to make these conversations feel more accessible or even safer to others who are perhaps in an exploration stage or not comfortable being out.

*AB: I read a lot of books that are generally not heteronormative, that are all over the spectrum. And one of my friends mentioned that they read a lot of the same books and eventually they ended up coming out to me in a very subtle way. I think they weren't sure, but they kind of were thinking about it. And I think that media and those books kind of made it easier to have that because we were already talking about it and we were already having that conversation... It doesn't feel as scary to say, "Oh, I listen to *Girl in Red*" and have someone understand that versus to outwardly say, "Oh, I'm a part of this community"*

Dating App Experiences.

As is often the case for people of color, several participants in the present study reported prior experiences of alienation, sexual racism, and fetishization on dating apps like Grindr, Tinder, and the like. When engaging in interracial relationships with white partners, queer South

Asians may be particularly susceptible to fetishization, microaggressions, and other uncomfortable or alienating dating experiences. Such was the case for participant SK previously:

SK: One of two times that I went on dates with white girls, they... one had like, I don't know... this interest in Hinduism and yoga, and I was not entirely sure like... it wasn't entirely clear to me that that wasn't, you know, an interest because of my assumed cultural knowledge and identity.

Others reflected on the cultural weight and emphasis placed on being “dateable” or “marriageable”, particularly for those who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). This produced added pressure and stress for participants.

Visibility and Leadership.

Participants spoke deeply throughout about feelings of isolation, disconnect, pain, or alienation even when able to access queer or South Asian spaces. This spurred some of them on to actively create opportunities for queer South Asian connection where they previously saw none, or to take on visible leadership roles within the community. Through this visibility and leadership, some have identified the significance this plays, even for those who are not able to be out or engage actively in some of the direct community connections.

ST: Being in an active role in that is something that no one really expected of me, I guess, so it felt good to do that. But then also since then I've had four or five friends who I've had long friendships with who are also queer, trans South Asians who weren't comfortable to be out when that event occurred, but in subsequent years we've had great conversations. So knowing that. I don't know, even if I'm not reaching everyone or

connecting with everyone in the moment, knowing that there are people who might silently feel that connection is also something that I value a lot.

(Re)connection to Culture, Customs, and History.

The final theme, and seemingly one of the most powerful to many participants, is the theme of reconnecting to culture, customs, and history as part of feeling whole in their queer South Asian identity. Participants exhibited incredible creativity in reworking and “queering” traditional holidays, rituals, and customs that they found to be hetero- or gender-normative.

ST: Even before I came to understand myself as non-binary, my sister and I were questioning the way gender showed up in our life... We've just had a lot of thoughts on gendered aspects of Hinduism that annoy us and so we sort of flipped it where we both tie these [rakhi] on each other because it's like, I don't know... queering the holiday, I guess.

Multiple others spoke of doing Bollywood drag or reworking straight Bollywood songs into queer ones for dance performance. A transmasculine participant spoke about the euphoria of attending a cultural event wearing a men’s sherwani for the first time.

Additionally, profound themes of queer ancestry and the importance of being able to feel connected to South Asian LGBTQ+ history came through for many participants. AB shared gratitude that her experience of Hinduism is LGBTQ+ affirming and inclusive, allowing her to feel greater confidence in connecting with others as her authentic self.

AB: So the thing that I think I like the most about my religion is that, at least in my experience, I've never felt that being a part of the LGBT community was something that's wrong, as I know that can happen with other religions a lot, but Hinduism, at least in my experience, has never been against it and there are instances of myths and stories of people who I think could be considered LGBTQ or like at least part of that community in

the past and I think for that, it's never made me feel ashamed of my identity. And that's something that I'm very grateful for. And so because of that, I think I've always felt confident enough to explore those experiences and explore those connections with people.

It was clear throughout interviews that, for some participants, gaining exposure to stories and narratives of queer South Asian ancestry was a profoundly moving and powerful emotional experience. For some, this even fueled their initiative in becoming leaders and a force for promoting connection across the community.

ST: *While I was shelving books on campus, there was a book I came across that was called like *The History of Same Sex Love in India* and in it there's this excerpt of... I might get a little teary eyed, but it's okay... of poetry by freedom fighters. And my dadaji (dad's dad) and my par nanaji (mom's mom's dad) were freedom fighters as well in India and they were like best friends. And reading that, I think that poetry of queer love among freedom fighters helped me feel more connected to the idea of queer ancestors as well. And I think that was a very... even though I'm teary eyed, it was a very joyful and connecting experience that I think then after that is when I felt more interested in creating the LGBTQ South Asian group on campus, being able to connect people in that area, so I think that aspect of connecting to history has been another key part of finding joy.*

The theme of queer history was also especially prominent in the area of gender diversity. For nonbinary and gender nonconforming interviewees, historical accounts of gender fluidity or

transgressive gender presentation bolstered self-confidence, helped challenge Eurocentric ideas of gender, and even eased dysphoria for some.

YR: Dravidian men, they had long hair, they wore skirts. Just because it's by a Eurocentric standard of, "Oh, that's what girls do", that doesn't mean shit. Yeah. And, like, now I just grew my hair out and I take care of it, and I feel connected to my roots. And that doesn't make me any less of whatever gender I am. And yeah, because even back then, I took a lot of like cisnormative and heteronormative signifiers of masculinity and just nailed that shit so hard. I was just like, "I need to know about cars and lift heavy things." It just... It wasn't me. And I still felt like I needed to constantly prove myself to this nebulous idea of, straight, white masculinity.

Participants were able to incorporate a sense of queer cultural pride and integrate queerness as a historically inherent part of South Asian culture, which challenges the stereotypical narratives of queerness and South Asian culture as incompatible. By seeing representation and knowledge being shared about pre-colonial South Asian conceptions of gender fluidity as well as the freedom associated with that, some participants were able to find beauty and affirmation in their own nonbinary identities.

EA: I'm a big follower of Alok Menon, and whenever they post anything about the history of non-binary people, I'm just like... beautiful, and beautiful that it's coming from this Desi person. I feel like we have an authority on the subject.

Discussion

The present study sought to explore South Asian LGBTQ+ people's conceptualizations and experiences of connection within their lives through a process of interview-based

phenomenological inquiry. It also sought to examine specifically how identity intersections influenced connection, disconnection, discrimination, and resilience as experienced by this population. Three main overarching themes or modalities of connection were identified by participants: interpersonal contextual connection, intrapersonal connection, and indirect connection. These were identified as each having their own challenges and joys, pointing towards the potential for a wide array of connections to matter outside of only in-depth in-person connections. It also illuminates contextual factors influencing the quality of these connections such as identity overlap, access to diverse media representation, and family and peer support.

A number of the findings of this study aligned with the content depicted in the model of intersectional stress and trauma in Asian American sexual and gender minorities (Fig. 1)(Ching et al., 2018). Structural/cultural factors including cultural norms both within white-dominated queer culture and heteronormative cultural expectations within post-colonial South Asian culture were highlighted by interviewees as exacerbating interpersonal discrimination and disconnection from LGBTQ+ and South Asian spaces or from family. These both also appeared to be tied to internalization of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and overall stigma. For some, these challenging experiences resulted in maladaptive coping, for instance disconnecting from others as a form of self-protection. Internalization of racism, misogyny, and other systems of oppression was also exhibited in participants' recollections of longing or striving to be white when growing up, which maps onto earlier findings about South Asian women's internalization of white beauty norms and ideals (Aujla, 2000).

The findings also align with intersectionality theory and minority stress theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Meyer, 2003). It was found that many participants experienced alienation, discrimination, disconnection, stress, or other forms of harm that were distinctly linked to the

intersection of their identities together rather than any one individual aspect, as these are inseparable. One example of challenging intersectional experiences came in the forms of alienation from various affinity spaces and non-intersectional communities, alongside additional challenges of navigating cultural and generational differences such as those surrounding the expectation of heterosexual marriage (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Choudhury et al., 2009). For instance, numerous participants spoke about feeling disconnected from predominantly white queer spaces and associated Eurocentric expectations of queerness, as well as feeling disconnected from cisgender- and heterosexual-dominated cultural, racial, or religious spaces given their LGBTQ+ identities. Furthermore, the theme of prescribed life paths, particularly pertaining to assumed heterosexual marriage, arose across many interviews, with participants reporting related pressures and assumptions from their families, religious communities, or cultural norms, aligning with previously mentioned literature. Another example of intersectional minority stress came in the form of possible prejudice, fetishization, and/or sexual racism encountered by participants on dating apps, which echoes previous findings in the literature linking race-related relationship/dating problems to psychological distress (Szymanski & Sung, 2010).

This study also highlights the intensity and stress of decision-making surrounding identity concealment versus outness. Given the wide range of reactions participants recounted upon coming out and their exposure to many negative coming-out narratives, it follows that this can produce significant fear and uncertainty about openly embracing one's identity. The desire for connections (or fear of losing them) may be a potential major motivator for decisions around identity concealment versus disclosure and to whom, as well as a determining factor for what standards of connection quality individuals are willing to withstand in order to preserve a

connection. It may be the case, as was true for several interviewees, that LGBTQ+ South Asians may conceal or suppress parts of themselves, or put up with relationships that devalue them in order to keep important others such as family members in their life. Though not all experiences were homogenous, a subset of participants had very painful and distressing coming-out experiences, which is in alignment with previous findings indicating outness may be linked for some to psychological distress for Asian sexual minority persons (Szymanski & Sung, 2010).

Also interestingly, in absence of open communication from family around relationships and dating, some second generation LGBTQ+ South Asians may rely on stereotypes or dominant narratives about cultural/religious intolerance to inform their decisions and approach to navigating their queer South Asian identity within the family context. Others may allow similar stereotypes to guide their interactions with even fellow community members. These dominant narratives and stereotypes, for example stereotypes of Muslim or broadly South Asian cultures as inherently homophobic also appear to influence connections with non-South Asian LGBTQ+ friends or peers. These stereotypes, and participants' experiences impacted by these stereotypes, are documented within existing literature, with queer Asian women feeling their cultures are often viewed as conservative in ways that are assumed to be in conflict with queerness (Alimahomed, 2010).

Aside from interpersonal, in-the-moment connections, one of the most impactful form of connections identified by a bulk of participants were indirect forms, particularly connection to queer South Asian history through learning about historical and mythological or religious figures as well as gaining an indirect sense of connection via consuming media that features queer South Asian representation. Taken together, these findings lay out grounds for future inquiry, and point

both towards the struggles and potentials for disconnection that exist for this population, as well as areas that may hold promise for healing.

Limitations

To preface the discussion of limitations of the present study, it may be beneficial to highlight differences in the aims of qualitative and quantitative research and, relatedly, how these differing approaches define limitations. Quantitative research often seeks to study causal mechanisms, whereas qualitative research, such as the present study, seeks instead to describe subjective experiences, explore relationships between concepts, and offer insights that add to the existing knowledge (Trafimow, 2013). Additionally, some quantitative research tends to assume universality of constructs or measures and places value on generalizability, so issues impacting these elements may be considered limitations, whereas qualitative research places greater emphasis on describing the unique lived experiences of the individuals comprising the sample, while simultaneously identifying shared overarching similarities.

Limitations must also be considered when evaluating the findings of this study. As is often the case with internet-based research, there are inherent limitations regarding accessibility (e.g. access to computer/device, video call software, private space to participate in the interview) as well as the potential for selection bias of those who are already connected to LGBTQ+ South Asian communities or those who are more apt to utilize social media due to the channels used for participant recruitment. It may also reflect overrepresentation of those who are more likely to be out, at least to some degree, or willing to discuss these topics with the researcher, whereas there may have been undersampling of those who are perhaps least open about their identities or most disconnected from existing queer South Asian community networks. Furthermore, this is a fairly young and educated sample, with all participants having at least some undergraduate college

experience (many were presently in college at the time of interview). Within the process of scheduling interviews, some potential participants in a slightly older age bracket were not able to find suitable space or availability in their schedules to align with the interview timeline, which raises the possibility that perhaps some older members of this community may have been confined by demands of work and/or family schedules in ways that hindered their ability to participate. Future research may benefit from aiming to have a more extended timeline for conducting interviews as well as flexibility in terms of time slots for scheduling interviews, particularly with attention to accommodating participants in a variety of timezones. Participants were located primarily in the Washington DC, Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) area, many of whom were near fairly major metropolitan areas, as were several other participants outside of the DMV area, which also provides a specific perspective and potentially limits insight into the connection/disconnection experiences of those who may be located in more rural, isolated, or non-metropolitan areas.

Though efforts were made to recruit broadly a number of participants from varying backgrounds, the sample is still unrepresentative in ways that, coupled with the study's qualitative nature, make it unwise to attempt to generalize these findings to specific subpopulations. As reflected in existing literature, studies conducted among South Asian participants broadly often seem to have predominantly Indian samples, whereas other South Asian identities are less represented, a trend with which the present study's sample also aligned (Inman et al., 2014). However, this study does still also have representation of Pakistani, Persian, Bangladeshi, and multiracial identities, all of which are less commonly represented in these lines of work. Additionally, though the sample was somewhat diverse in regards to gender, there were relatively few participants specifically identifying as masculine, with only one cisgender man,

and there were no solely binary transgender participants. This leaves a gap in the kinds of narratives and experiences discussed. While there was strong representation of non-monosexual identities (e.g. bisexuality/pansexuality) and broadly queer/unspecifically labeled identities, some other sexual orientation identities were much less represented (e.g. asexuals, gay men), leaving a gap that may be addressed with future, more specified or targeted research with these subgroups. Naturally, given the qualitative design of this study, an additional inherent limitation is the inability to investigate causality in an empirical sense. However, despite these potential limitations, the potential gains from this research and narratives from within this community could be substantial and a very worthwhile addition to the existing research within this topic area, with potential real-world benefits in advancing knowledge about diverse queer experiences and connection.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings of this study highlight the importance of understanding identity, experience, and connection through an intersectional lens, particularly when considering populations who hold multiple intersecting marginalized identities such as LGBTQ+ South Asians. It may be beneficial for future research to explore identity development processes for this population as well as individuals' relationship with their identities. Developmental research examining turning points in the lives of LGBTQ+ South Asians (e.g. realizing differences between one's self and others racially, one's first sense of non-heterosexuality, coming out, first exposure to other South Asian LGBTQ+ people, etc.) could help to illuminate how this specific intersection of identities evolve throughout life. Future research could also investigate how these identities develop in tandem and potentially shape each other throughout development. In the present study, for instance, some participants spoke about how already being perceived as outsiders due to being

South Asian in predominantly white environments put them in closer proximity to others who faced social ostracization, such as LGBTQ+ peers, which may have aided their self-realization and LGBTQ+ connection-building, despite stemming from negative circumstances. Future research would benefit from further exploring how individuals' identity development and salience contributes to their perceptions and experiences of connection and disconnection. It could be possible that greater salience of these intersecting identities may prompt someone to seek out LGBTQ+ South Asian community and resources, but high awareness of these identities may also make one more cognizant of exclusion and marginalization they face for who they are. Others who divorce themselves from their identity or groups may be more prone to disconnection and isolation. Quantitative inquiry in this area could potentially help clarify any possible interactions between identity salience, critical consciousness, and wellbeing outcomes such as feelings of connection, social belonging, and other markers of mental health. For counseling professionals, it may be helpful to explore with clients how holding these intersecting identities has contributed to their growth, despite marginalization. For instance, it seems that some study participants felt that navigating their LGBTQ+ South Asian identity has made them more open-minded, inclusive, and compassionate people.

This study illuminated certain nuances relating to multiracial, nonbinary, and non-monosexual (bisexual, pansexual, etc.) identities which may lie between or outside traditional and binary conceptions of identity, requiring additional layers of identity navigation and reconciliation. People with these identities tend to be underrepresented in research and may also experience erasure within broader LGBTQ+ and/or POC communities. This is an area for future exploration, as there was still a limited sample size in the present study and material relating to these identities was not always the focal point of the interviews. Additionally, future research

may benefit by exploring dynamics impacting South Asian queer men and masculine gender experiences, given that the present study had very limited male representation.

A notable potential strength of this study is the representation of diverse nonbinary identities and experiences, with the majority of participants identifying as nonbinary or using this as a modifier alongside traditionally binary masculine or feminine gender identities. This may be an indicator of broadening and more fluid conceptions of gender in younger generations, given that the sample skews fairly young. This is also an interesting sample characteristic given the rich, longstanding history of gender fluidity and gender diversity within pre-colonial South Asian cultures, as highlighted by numerous participants. Given the themes raised of valuing queer ancestors, queer South Asian history, and specifically transgender and gender-nonconforming figures within those cultural histories, this may illuminate a particular salience of and connection to nonbinary concepts of gender within this specific community. Future research may benefit from further exploring these connections, specifically the significance and potential healing aspects of connecting with queer South Asian history and queering customs. This may also benefit practitioners working with nonbinary or transgender South Asian clients. Helping professionals may consider familiarizing themselves with examples of pre-colonial South Asian gender expansiveness or facilitating clients' connection with relevant roots from their own racial/cultural/religious backgrounds and aiding them in their exploration. Similarly to findings of the present study, previous qualitative research within the LGBTQ+ South Asian community has reflected similar themes of (re)connecting with the language of South Asian gender expansiveness, sexual fluidity, and other queer conceptualizations of connection that lie outside Western definitions and discourses of queerness (Adur & Purkayastha, 2016).

Furthermore, participants' understanding of connection as wide-ranging and inclusive of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and indirect forms is illuminating and speaks to the meaningfulness of connections that do not necessarily meet the threshold of instilling a deep, enduring sense of belonging. Particularly for those in less diverse or more remote environments that may be lacking queer South Asian populations, practitioners may still be able to encourage and assist clients in identifying forms of intrapersonal and indirect connection that have the potential to be of benefit. For instance, engaging with queer South Asian media, seeking out online community, engaging in journaling and introspection, and perhaps cognitive reframing of being the "black sheep" for straying from the heteronormative life path as an opportunity to embrace the boundlessness and expressive freedom of South Asian queerness without a blueprint.

For practitioners and those involved in higher education student programming or community organizations, this study highlights the value of creating specific spaces or events targeted for this intersection of identities. It is important for people in these professions to be mindful of possible factors that could alienate LGBTQ+ South Asians from cultural or LGBTQ+ spaces and events. Oftentimes LGBTQ+ South Asians have to create these affirming spaces themselves or be extremely active in seeking out community with shared identities. The work of counseling professionals with this population would be benefitted by expressing genuine curiosity about their experiences without making assumptions. It is important to recognize the potential for LGBTQ+ South Asians to experience significant harm, prejudice, rejection, and abuse, but equally important to avoid stereotyping their cultures, families, or communities, particularly in ways that reinforce misconceptions of queerness and South Asian identity as inherently conflicting. If it is an area of relevance that arises in therapy, it may be beneficial to

work from a strengths-based perspective by considering and exploring ways the client's culture, religion, history, or background may be sources of healing, coping, or social support.

In counselor training, it may serve the future of the field well to integrate more readings, case conceptualization, and similar materials fostering a better understanding of intersectional identities, experiences, and minority stress, including for LGBTQ+ POC. Learning about race and sexual orientation as separate distinct identity pieces without also understanding their intersections does a disservice to populations who are already often overlooked and marginalized. Multicultural aspects of counselor training may aim to challenge misconceptions or stereotypes and avoid broad sweeping generalizations, such as assumptions that religion (especially common South Asian religions) and LGBTQ+ identity are incompatible or that LGBTQ+ South Asians will inherently face family rejection or unsupportiveness. It should also incorporate discussions that seek to challenge and disrupt Eurocentric conceptions of gender and sexuality, as these may feel more rigid, constricting, or culturally dissonant for LGBTQ+ South Asians, but might be imposed on clients if trainees' implicit biases are left unchecked.

In conclusion, the stories and experiences shared by study participants offer researchers, practitioners, and fellow community members insight into how young people at the intersection of these identities define, experience, and pursue connection in its various forms. It shows that even small or indirect connections have the power to be healing. It also highlights the incredible power of not feeling alone, not being "the only one", and gaining an awareness that queer South Asians have existed throughout our cultural and religious histories. Not only that, but it illustrates the empowerment and feeling of consonance that can come from embracing those histories and our culture as a possible historical hub of queerness. While this study undoubtedly highlights numerous challenging barriers to connection and sources of disconnection, sometimes

extremely painful ones, endured by LGBTQ+ South Asians, it also highlights the resilience, creativity, and compassion that exists within this community, a strength which can undoubtedly lead to collective healing and wholeness.

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