BETWEEN DIGITAL HATE AND QUEER PRIDE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LGBTQIA+ EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH IN NEPAL

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A Dissertation

Submitted to
School of Education

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Degree of
Master in Sustainable Development

Kathmandu University
Dhulikhel, Nepal

November 2025

AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Sulav Ratna Bajracharya* for the degree of *Master in Sustainable Development,* presented on 20 November 2025, entitled *Between Digital Hate and Queer Pride: A Thematic Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Experiences and Perceptions of Online Hate Speech in Nepal.*

APPROVED BY

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Asst. Prof. Suresh Gautam, PhD

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This dissertation examines the experiences and perceptions of online hate speech among LGBTQIA+ youth aged 18-24 in Nepal. The interpretive qualitative research is informed by the Minority Stress Theory and based on in-depth interviews with ten LGBTQIA+ youth in Kathmandu Valley.

Findings indicate that LGBTQIA+ youth in Nepal experience widespread hate on the internet, which takes the form of normalized slurs, humor-based mockery, and dehumanizing remarks. Such digital animosity has emotional impacts such as anxiety, depression, hypervigilance and internalized queerphobia. Systemic neglect from families, schools, law enforcement, and digital platforms, which frequently downplay queer-related issues, exacerbates this stress. Nevertheless, LGBTQIA+ youth demonstrate resilience and agency through several coping mechanisms, including identity management, emotional disengagement, selective disclosure, and counter-engagement. Above all, community solidarity, online and offline, serves as a very important buffer against minority stress, by offering safety, affirmation and empowerment. The conclusion of the study further emphasizes that queerphobia in Nepal should be countered through institutional, digital, and legal reform.

…… 20 November 2025

Sulav Ratna Bajracharya

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शोध सार

विकास शिक्षामा स्नातकोत्तर उपाधिका लागि सुलभ रत्न बज्राचार्य को शोध प्रबन्धको शीर्षक "डिजिटल घृणा र क्वेयर गर्व: घृणात्मक अभिव्यक्तिबारे नेपालको एलजीबीटीक्यूआईए+ समुदायको अनुभव र बुझाइबारे विषयगत विश्लेषण" ४ मंसिर २०८२ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो ।

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उप. प्रा सुरेश गौतम, पीएचडी

शोध निर्देशक

यो शोध प्रबन्धले नेपालका १८-२४ वर्ष उमेरका LGBTQIA+ युवाहरूले इन्टरनेटमा हुने घृणात्मक अभिव्यक्ति (hate speech) को बारे के विचार राख्छन् र यसलाई कसरी अनुभव गर्छन् भन्ने कुरा अध्ययन गर्छ। यो अध्ययन Minority Stress Theory मा आधारित छ र काठमाडौं उपत्यकाका दस जना LGBTQIA+ युवासँग गरिएको अन्तर्वार्तामा आधारित छ।

अध्ययनले नेपालका LGBTQIA+ युवाहरूले इन्टरनेटमा धेरै प्रकारका घृणा र अपमानजनक कुरा सहनुपर्छ भनेर देखाउँछ। गाली गलौज, अपमानजनक शब्द, मजाक, र अमानवीय जन्तुसँग तुलना गरी उनीहरूलाई दुख पुऱ्याइएको देखिन्छ। यस्तो दुर्व्यवहारले उनीहरूमा चिन्ता, डिप्रेसन, अत्यधिक सतर्कता, र आफूप्रति नकारात्मक सोच (internalized queerphobia) जस्ता भावनात्मक प्रभाव परेको छ। परिवार, विद्यालय, प्रहरी जस्ता संस्थाहरूले LGBTQIA+ सम्बन्धी समस्यालाई गम्भीर रूपमा नलिने, र डिजिटल प्लेटफर्महरूले पनि बेवास्ता गर्ने भएकाले यो तनावलाई अझ बढाउँछ। यद्यपि, LGBTQIA+ युवाहरूले विभिन्न तरिकाले सामना गर्ने क्षमता र आफ्नो स्वतन्त्रता देखाएका छन्। उनीहरूले पहिचान व्यवस्थापन गर्ने, भावनात्मक रूपमा टाढिन खोज्ने, आफ्नो पहिचान बारे केही जानकारी मात्र साझा गर्ने, र आवश्यक परे प्रतिरोध वा जवाफ दिने उपाय अपनाउँछन्। सबैभन्दा महत्वपूर्ण कुरा, अनलाइन र अफलाइन दुवै ठाउँमा हुने समुदायको साथ, समर्थन, र एकताले उनीहरूलाई धेरै ठूलो हौसला मिलेको देखिन्छ। अन्त्यमा, अध्ययनले नेपालमा रहेको क्वेयरफोबियालाई हटाउनका लागि संस्थागत, डिजिटल, र कानुनी सुधार अत्यन्त आवश्यक छ भन्ने कुरा जोड दिन्छ।

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४ मंसिर २०८२

सुलभ रत्न बज्राचार्य

उपाधि उम्मेदवार

This dissertation entitled *Between Digital Hate and Queer Pride: A Thematic Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Experiences and Perceptions of Online Hate Speech in Nepal* presented by *Sulav Ratna Bajracharya* on 20 November 2025.

APPROVED BY

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I understand that my dissertation will become a part of the permanent collection of the library of Kathmandu University. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.

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Sulav Ratna Bajracharya
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work, and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to the ten amazing LGBTQIA+ youths who opened their hearts to me and shared their stories without being shy, afraid, and insecure. Your voices, feelings, and thoughts made my work meaningful. I also dedicate my work to the broader LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal, whose strength, affection, and undeterred struggle to be accepted are inspirational. This study is a little tribute to their daily heroism, hope, and pride.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my utmost gratitude to everyone who helped me complete this dissertation, Between Digital Hate and Queer Pride: A Thematic Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Experiences and Perceptions of Online Hate Speech in Nepal.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Mr. Suresh Gautam, whose knowledge, advice, and constant support helped me to develop this research from its inception to the final stages. I am equally grateful to my External Examiner, Mr. Sanjay Hamal and Dean Mr. Bal Chandra Luitel for their valuable time and scholarly review of my work. I would like to credit the Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED) for providing me with the necessary academic base and support to undertake the Master in Sustainable Development.

Without the ten brave LGBTQIA+ youth who were open about their experiences and vulnerabilities, this research would not be possible. I admire their strength and belief. I also recognize the unstoppable efforts of the community-based organizations like the Blue Diamond Society for its advocacy and serving as a lifeline to individuals who are queer in Nepal.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends who were so patient, encouraging, and supportive. It is their belief in me that has helped me in this journey through the hardest moments.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFAB	Assigned Female at Birth
AMAB	Assigned Male at Birth
BDS	Blue Diamond Society
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EU	European Union
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IDI	In-depth Interview
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
ISP	Internet Service Provider
KUSOED	Kathmandu University School of Education
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and other related identities
MST	Minority Stress Theory
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics
TA	Thematic Analysis
TOS	Terms of Service
UN	United Nations

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Chapter

The terms “LGBTQIA+” and “queer”, in general, refer to a wide range of sexual orientations and gender identities that challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Driver et al., 2022). Modern societies tend to use these two terms interchangeably. The LGBTQIA+ is an acronym that refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and other related identities (Ervin et al., 2023).

As a child growing up in Kathmandu, I often heard the term “gay” being used as an insult at home, at school, and in the community. During my late teenage years, the internet was where I first came across the real voices of LGBTQIA+ people. This opened new doors to my understanding of LGBTQIA+ identities. Although online spaces created visibility and connection, I kept noticing the presence of constant hate speech, whether it be in social media posts, comments, or online forums. These experiences and observations motivated me to study how LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal perceive and cope with online hate speech. This chapter covers a brief background of my study, the statement of the problem, followed by the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance, and ultimately, the study’s limitations.

Background

Although today the aspects of LGBTQIA+ identities, which include the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and other related identities (Ervin et al., 2023), are getting more and more recognized, they are still subject to a lot of aggression, especially in the digital world. Internet penetration in Nepal has been growing at a spectacular rate with 15.4 million users and an increased penetration rate of 49.6 percent as of January 2024 (DataReportal, 2024). The 18-24-year-olds are the most active users of the internet and social media where 93% of them use the internet and social media on a daily basis (Carcelén-García et al., 2023). The surge in digital activity has been linked with the growing number of cybercrimes in the younger age bracket (Setopati, 2019). Even with the efforts made by social media platforms to remove or block hate speech, it continues to proliferate on the internet (Lupu et al., 2023; Stefanita & Buf, 2021). The lack of a single, unified

definition of hate speech is one of the most significant obstacles for researchers, legislators, and tech platforms to act effectively (Brown, 2017). Kansok-Dusche et al. (2022) postulates that hate speech is any form of derogatory communication, including text, images, or videos, and is directed at individuals or groups, depending on their belonging to a specific ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. This form of speech is usually aimed at inflicting damage, and it may impact individuals on personal, community, and societal levels.

One of the forms of hate speech targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals that insults, threatens, or dehumanizes the victim is queerphobic hate speech (Banerjee & Nguyen, 2023). It reinforces the idea that heterosexual identity and cisgender identity are only normal, presenting LGBTQIA + people as being unnatural or aberrant. Homosexual and transgender people are often diminished to sexual stereotypes and humiliated with hate speech (Banerjee & Nguyen, 2023). The hate speech usually intensifies in the aftermath of some important political or social event and can even be used more widely as a political insult (Lupu et al., 2023). In the case of LGBTQIA+ individuals, such content may result in psychological harm and predispose people to violence (Banerjee & Nguyen, 2023).

This trend of queerphobic hate speech is specifically relevant to South Asia, where the majority of countries still implement laws of colonial times that criminalize same-sex relationships, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Loft et al., 2022). Nepal is a nation that has made progress in acknowledging LGBTQIA+ rights by making historic strides in the 2015 Constitution to acknowledge the third gender and to guarantee proportional representation in the local institutions (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). Nevertheless, there are still implementation lapses. The social and economic discrimination against many LGBTQIA+ people remains unresolved by bureaucratic barriers, poor political representation, social stigma, and poor protection from law enforcement (ILGA Asia, 2021). The LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal still encounter discrimination when it comes to obtaining citizenship documents, healthcare, education, and employment, as well as not being accepted by their families and communities (Khatry, 2021; Ojha, 2024b).

There are no particular hate crimes or anti-discrimination laws in Nepal that can directly defend the LGBTQIA+ people and prevent violence against them (Syangden, 2018). The statistics that reveal the real prevalence of hate speech are often inadequate since hate speech online is not technically reported to the police as

often as offline crimes (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2016). Thus, it is necessary to listen to the authentic voices of the LGBTQIA+ individuals so that their stories will not be disrupted by the legal and reporting differences.

In Kathmandu, LGBTQIA+ people have reported being coerced and verbally abused both in their families and schools (Ojha, 2024a). The internet enhances this level of hostility because of its anonymity, immediacy, global and low entry barriers (Banks, 2010; Cohen-Almagor, 2011). Studies suggest that anonymity in particular is a factor that leads to hate speech on the internet toward sexual and gender minorities (Stefanita & Buf, 2021). This interplay of online and offline hate has offered a complex environment where LGBTQIA+ members must navigate through and combat discrimination on both levels at all times.

Statement of Problem

Online violence is becoming an increasing trend in Nepal, with 54% of LGBTQIA+ individuals having been the victims of online emotional abuse (UN Women, 2023). According to the existing trends of online queerphobic hate speech, including the use of slurs, personal insults, and harassment, it has been determined that online hate speech could be an incredibly disturbing emotional experience and predispose LGBTQIA+ people to be vulnerable in real-life contexts (Niraula, 2022).

Among the most exposed groups with high levels of vulnerability are young users aged 18-24, who over trust the online space and are unaware of digital risks (Carcelén-García et al., 2023). Online queerphobic hate speech is also disproportionately targeted at the youths of this age group with serious long-term consequences like school dropout, substance abuse, and social instability (Keighley, 2022). However, there is a lack of literature about the impact of online queerphobic hate speech on the daily lives of LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal.

The disparity is even more apparent through the existing institutional data. As per the Nepal Police Headquarters (FY 2080/81), only one LGBTQIA+ person was officially counted among victims of 3,489 sexual violence and 16,434 domestic violence cases (Women, Children and Senior Citizens Service Directorate, 2024), but according to a national study by the UN Women, 81% of the LGBTQIA+ people had been victims of violence, most commonly by their families, police, or health facilities, with 25% of emotional abuse being perpetrated online (UN Women, 2023). Such a gap is a reflection of radical under-reporting, under-recognition, and institutional

oversights to ensure that the LGBTQIA+ experiences are represented with due seriousness.

Even though existing literature has focused on Nepal's legal changes (ILGA Asia, 202; Mahato, 2017), there is scant insight into the lived experiences and perceptual frameworks of LGBTQIA+ youth as they navigate digital hate, and how their online experiences intersect with offline realities in a heteronormative society that remains largely insensitive to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) concerns on an institutional scale. My dissertation fills these major gaps by analyzing the implications of online hate speech on the well-being, sense of self, and social integration of LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal by putting their voices and lived experiences into focus.

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to explore the experience of LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal in relation to their exposure to online queerphobic hate speech, the way it influences their emotional, social, and daily lives, and their coping mechanisms, including their attitude towards the institutional support.

Research Questions

How do LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal experience online queerphobic hate speech, and what influence does it have on their emotional well-being, social relationships and daily lives?

How do LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal cope with or respond to online queerphobic hate speech, and what are their attitudes toward institutional support?

Rationale of the Study

Due to a lack of scholarly focus on the realities of queer people in the digital spaces of Nepal, this study is required to offer more visibility to LGBTQIA+ individuals who must face hate speech in a society where their families, schools, and society at large tend to be unsupportive. The study is especially timely in the light of the increasing levels of online engagement and a growing number of reported cases of online violence in Nepal, particularly at the crossroads where institutionalized agents such as law enforcement, educational institutions, and technology platforms are still not responding adequately to their experiences of victimization. My study highlights the everyday experiences of online hate faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals which otherwise remains invisible to policymakers, educators, and technology platforms. It

is extremely necessary to dismantle the cycle of harm and exclusion faced by LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal.

Significance of the Study

Documenting the impact of online queerphobic hate speech is necessary in policy advocacy, interventions, and awareness activities. The findings include evidence to encourage the national and global stakeholders to enhance the protection against LGBTQIA+ discrimination, promote more inclusive legislation, and ensure that digital harassment is effectively addressed.

The research also holds significance in promoting sustainable development goals (SDGs). It relates to SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being by emphasizing that online hate speech increases mental health issues of LGBTQIA+ individuals. This knowledge of the implications of online hate speech is vital to the development of direct interventions and prevention programs to achieve improved well-being. SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities is also advanced in this study as it gives a voice to marginalized people and addresses structural and social inequalities impacting LGBTQIA+ individuals. Finally, the study contributes towards a formulation of the intersectional approaches that can tackle both legal and cultural disparities aimed at achieving the core SDG principle of "leaving no one behind."

Delimitations of the Study

This study also has a few pre-set delimitations, as I had adopted deliberate ways to narrow the scope of the study. The study is geographically confined to the Kathmandu Valley and therefore does not reflect the whole range of experiences found in the rural and multicultural areas of Nepal. This is warranted because LGBTQIA+ youth between 18-24 years are the most active online, most exposed to digital risks, and are disproportionately affected by queerphobic hate speech, which can lead to severe social and psychological outcomes (Carcelén-García et al., 2023; Keighley, 2022).

The research is methodologically focused on the depth of qualitative research and not on the quantitative aspects; therefore, it is focused on individual stories and not on statistical descriptions. It emphasizes the perceptions of online hate that participants had encountered on social media, messaging services, and public forums, as well as their perceptions regarding institutional gaps. It does not examine online content directly or assess policies at the institutions.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter is a review of available papers, reports, and articles regarding the issue of online queerphobic hate speech. It examines the conceptualization of LGBTQIA+ identities and queerphobic hate speech, the situation of LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal, the types and nature of online queerphobic hate speech, its emotional and psychological effects, coping and resistance, and the explanation of the Minority Stress Theory.

Conceptualizing LGBTQIA+ Identities and Queerphobic Hate Speech

"LGBTQIA+" is a wide concept that encompasses, though is not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual people (Ervin et al., 2023). Likewise, the term "queer" is also a broad concept that refers to people whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity and/or gender expression are not within traditional societal norms, including heterosexual or cisgender identities (Driver et al., 2022). Though previously used as a pejorative, the term "queer" has been reappropriated as a sign of political protest in modern society and is now more affirmatively embraced to reflect LGBTQIA+ gender identities and sexual orientations (Ervin et al., 2023). The application of such umbrella terms is useful in recognizing a wide diversity of identities; nevertheless, they can sometimes hide a wildly different experience of subgroups and individuals belonging to this more general concept (Ervin et al., 2023).

In its most basic definition, hate speech is a bias-driven, hostile, and malevolent expression towards a person or a group of people, based on perceived innate traits like gender, race, religion, ethnicity, color, nationality, disability, or sexual orientation (Cohen-Almagor, 2011). It can have various forms, such as text, pictures, and videos (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2022). However, not every speech that is offensive or insulting qualifies as hate speech under the law, drawing complications on where to establish the boundary between what is ethically objectionable speech and what is legally unacceptable (George, 2015). The absence of a commonly agreed-upon single definition of hate speech is one of the largest obstacles in addressing the

issue, adding difficulty for researchers, politicians, and technology platforms to formulate effective action (Brown, 2017).

Speech can be criminalized when it harms targets, is a catalyst to violence, harms social relationships, or offends grossly outside the immediate group (Williams & Mishcon de Reya, n.d.). A more nuanced approach to defining hate speech is that such speech results in some level of harm that should be regulated by the government, which links hate speech to the capacity of the speaker to cause harm, vulnerability of the hearer as a member of the systematically disadvantaged group, and the content of the speech (Gelber, 2019). The hate speech is more likely to include deprivation of powers, which entails taking away the right to make daily decisions, their agency, their right to exist, or existentially denying the legitimacy of their voice (Sinpeng et al., 2021). The effect of the internet in the propagation of hate speech is tremendous due to the anonymity, immediacy, global reach, and low-entry barrier associated with the internet (Banks, 2010; Cohen-Almagor, 2011). Studies show that online hate speech is closely linked to anonymity, particularly hate speech against sexual orientation (Stefanita & Buf, 2021).

One of the types of hate speech that targets LGBTQIA+ individuals and is aimed at offending, intimidating, or dehumanizing them is queerphobic hate speech (Banerjee and Nguyen, 2023). It contributes to the idea that only heterosexuality and cisgender identity is natural by portraying LGBTQIA+ people as unnatural and deviant. These messages usually reduce LGBTQIA+ people to sexual stereotypes and demean them with vulgar language (Banerjee & Nguyen, 2023).

Minority Stress Theory

One of the fundamental theoretical approaches to the understanding of health and well-being inequalities in the LGBTQIA+ community is the Minority Stress Theory (MST) developed by Ilan Meyer in 2003 (Meyer, 2003). The gist of the MST hypothesis is that LGBTQIA+ individuals are exposed to disproportionate social pressure because of the stigmatized minority status they have in a heteronormative and cisnormative society. This chronic stress is one of the factors that lead to increased mental health issues among LGBTQIA+ individuals than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003).

The model of MST differentiates between two groups of stressors: 1) the distal stressors, which are the external and objective stressors, such as prejudice, discrimination, and violence; and 2) the proximal stressors, which are the processes

that lead to stress and reside within a person, including the anticipation of rejection, the necessity of highly vigilant behavior in their defense, the concealment of their LGBTQIA+ identity, and internalized stigma, like the internalized homophobia or transphobia (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). The ameliorative factors, including coping, social support, and resilience similarly contribute to MST and neutralize the negative impact of minority stress.

Globally, MST has informed research on mental health risks (Alessi, 2014; Frost & Meyer, 2023), as well as physical health outcomes linked to stress pathways (Flentje et al., 2019). It has also been implemented in interventions that influence clinical practices, policies, and even legislation for stigma reduction. The model has been modified to take into account the distinct stressors that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience, including cisnormativity, misgendering, and identity invalidation (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). The existing Nepali literature reflects growing cyber violence but rarely examines the emotional and identity-related consequences of it in terms of minority stress. There is a research gap in fully integrating online and social media experiences of LGBTQIA+ people into MST. While MST recognizes protective factors like coping, social support, and community connectedness, current frameworks do not adequately consider the role of online spaces in providing these supports. My dissertation aims to address these gaps through exploring how Nepali LGBTQIA+ people experience, perceive, and manage hate speech on the internet with a focus on the mutual dependence of digital, cultural, and psychological dimensions within the paradigm of minority stress.

Although MST has been criticized for its deficit-based approach to LGBTQIA+ identities in the past, it still offers essential insights for analyzing the roles of stigma as well as support systems in LGBTQIA+ health issues. The MST framework helps place the Nepal's situation in a global context of LGBTQIA+ health and rights. In Nepal, MST would be especially important to consider the effects of online queerphobic hate speech and map the intersection of distal stressors (public shaming, threats, digital harassment) and proximal stressors (self-censorship, fear of disclosure, internalized stigma). Meanwhile, MST can also be used to understand the resilience of the Nepali LGBTQIA+ community, wherein peer networks both online and offline bring solidarity, validation, and coping resources to this population.

Situation of the LGBTQIA+ Community in Nepal

The section gives a background of the larger socio-legal and cultural environment in which queer lives exist in Nepal. It includes the legal and policy context of the country concerning the LGBTQIA+ community and the milestones and the loopholes in their recognition and protection. The literature presents how patriarchal structure, institutional negligence, and heteronormative social ideal affect the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals in their day to day lives. It also examines the overlap of family disavowal and institutional violence, which increases the vulnerability of LGBTQIA+ people. Finally, this section examines how the internet has transformed to an important tool of self-discovery, community building, and resistance despite strengthening new sources of danger and vulnerability.

Legal and Policy Landscape of LGBTQIA+ Rights

Nepal is considered one of the most liberal countries in South Asia regarding the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity or SOGI rights (International Alert 2022; Khadgi 2024; Oestreich 2017). In comparison to other countries in the region, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, where laws still exist that criminalize same-sex relationships, they have not been criminalized in Nepal (Loft et al., 2022). In December 2007, a landmark Supreme Court decision (Pant v. Nepal) was made endorsing the fundamental human rights of sexual and gender minorities in Nepal (Acharya 2019; UN Women 2023). This decision required the government to eliminate discriminatory laws, inquire and implement policies on same-sex marriage, and legally recognize a “third-gender” or “other” category on the citizenship documents at self-identification (Acharya, 2019; Singh et al., 2012).

The further legalization of LGBTQIA+ rights was also achieved in 2015 by the Constitution of Nepal and was recognized as a progressive approach to the consideration of human rights on the international level (UN Women, 2023). Article 12 of the Constitution grants citizens the right to self-identify their gender on citizenship records as either male or female or “other,” Article 18 prohibits discrimination against gender and sexual minorities and ensures the right to equality, and Article 42 ensures right of sexual and gender minorities to work in state institutions in accordance with the principle of inclusion (Sow et al., 2022). Moreover, the right to privacy, right to freedom of expression, and the right to live with dignity indicated in the Constitution, protect the LGBTQIA+ rights (UN Women, 2023).

Even though Nepal has progressive policies and a constitution, it is not devoid of controversy and criticism. Nepal census has continuously missed the truth behind LGBTQIA+ people. In the 2011 census, only 1,500 people were counted as "third gender," separate from male and female, which left out many other LGBTQIA+ identities (Khadgi, 2021). The 2021 census offered the category of "other gender" based on the legal identifier on their citizenship document as a mechanism to count all individuals belonging to the LGBTQIA+ population, leading to 2,928 people (0.01%) being cited as "other gender" (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2023). However, the category of "other" has been extremely controversial and criticized as discriminatory to exclude the SOGIESC diversity and risk further exclusion in the policy planning (Khadgi, 2021). These shortcomings highlight the untrustworthy data and the overall gap in LGBTQIA+ realities in Nepal.

Recommendations of the Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriage have not been implemented yet, and the National Civil (Code) Act of 2017 states that marriage could only be between a man and a woman, giving LGBTQIA+ couples no coverage under the Domestic Violence (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2009 (Sow et al., 2022). Moreover, the current assault legislation does not cover sexual and gender minorities extensively, and the definitions of rape are rather narrow, meaning that male and transgender victims have no legal recourse (Acharya, 2019; Blue Diamond Society [BDS], 2013).

Synthetically, although the constitutional and legal progress in Nepal has made the country a leader in SOGI rights in the region, the disparity between the law and its application is still significant. In the light of Minority Stress Theory, these contradictions between progressive legal recognition and constrained social and institutional inclusion serve as distal stressors; whereby acting as structural circumstances that generate continuous stress in LGBTQIA+ individuals. Despite the fact that the law officially proclaims equality, the inconsistency of the law in practice and the absence of its acknowledgment in daily mechanisms (including census data, legal protection against violence, the right to marry) continue to produce a feeling of institutional nullification. This in turn leads to proximal stressors of internalized queerphobia, hypervigilance and distrust of state mechanisms where people are taught that their identities are accepted in principle but not in practice. My dissertation talks about the ways in which LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal cope with this contradiction

between formal equality and daily marginalization especially as these systemic pressures escalate in the online space.

Patriarchy and Institutional Violence

The real experiences of LGBTQIA+ people are limited by the strong patriarchal system embedded in the country. Heteronormative social order still favors the male-headed family structure and imposes on people to adhere to the traditional gender roles and sexual norms (Syangden, 2018). As a result, numerous sexual and gender minorities are marginalized and stigmatized, which results in either hiding their identities or yielding to the pressure of their families and society from a young age (Boyce & Coyle, 2013; Greene, 2015).

LGBTQIA+ people experience the disproportionate risk of violence, including intimate partner violence and family violence, as opposed to cisgender people and heterosexual people worldwide (Amos et al., 2023). Heteronormativity, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and the prejudice against intersex people are dominant across the globe (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). In Nepal, reports suggest a similar pattern as the LGBTQIA+ community is subjected to widespread discrimination, social stigma, harassment, and violence (BDS, 2018).

It was revealed in a national study that 81% of the LGBTQIA+ people experienced some kind of violence, including emotional, physical, sexual, and economic abuse (UN Women, 2023). However, according to the Nepal Police Headquarters (FY 2080/81), only one LGBTQIA+ person was registered as a victim in 3,489 cases of sexual violence and 16,434 cases of domestic violence (Women, Children & Senior Citizens Service Directorate, 2024). This is an indication of extreme underreporting, misidentification, and institutional inability to record the LGBTQIA+ experiences accurately. The difference between the official police reports and the lived experiences are also the signs of the institutionalization of the queerphobic violence and neglect.

Considered through the prism of Minority Stress Theory, such patriarchal and institutional neglect patterns are distal stressors, or external, structural factors that place sexual and gender minorities under chronic stress. Heteronormativity and the lack of institutionalization convey to queer people that their identities are not accepted and legitimate. This then promotes proximal stressors including internalized queerphobia, self-censorship, and hypervigilance both in physical and online arenas.

The insufficiency of legal and institutional safeguards also reduces the confidence in the state apparatus, and many LGBTQIA+ individuals have to cope with violence and discrimination themselves without any access to justice or psychosocial support.

These dynamics explain the ways in which the patriarchal and institutional structures within Nepal reinforce a cycle of structural and psychological abuse. My thesis thus examines the ways in which these structural stressors interact with digital spaces in which patriarchal attitudes are both reinforced and challenged, and how LGBTQIA+ people secure the safety, visibility, and belonging in such spaces.

Family and Social Rejection

Some queerphobic hate crimes are reactionary. They develop as a progression of personal encounters in a private space with familiar perpetrators like friends, family, and intimates, rather than entirely predatory behavior by strangers in public (Kehoe, 2020). Family is a significant reason behind early adversity of LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal, who might encounter rejection, punishment, and various efforts to correct their identities by taunting, scolding, and even physically abusing them (Ojha, 2024b; UN Women, 2023).

In response to their children coming out as LGBTQIA+, parents have reportedly threatened suicide (UN Women, 2023). This non-acceptance may cause LGBTQIA+ members to estrange their own families or conceal identities and live up to the heterosexual marriage norms (United Nations Development Plan [UNDP] & United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2014).

Outside of the family, non-conforming identities are likely to lead to social ostracism (Acharya, 2019) and widespread stigmatization based on the beliefs that LGBTQIA+ people "corrupt society" (ILGA Asia, 2021). Queerphobic slurs, such as "chhakka," often lead to verbal abuse and turn into physical violence, such as the incident in Nepal when people were reportedly beaten following the use of derogatory names at the public temples (UN Women, 2023).

Theoretically, according to Minority Stress Theory, such family and social rejections are distal stressors, which arise because of systemic heteronormativity and patriarchal control. This rejection sends a message to LGBTQIA+ people that their identities do not fit cultural and moral normative expectations, which creates proximal stressors of internalized queerphobia, identity concealment, and anticipatory anxiety. Most of these messages are internalized by society and tend to force a person to self-

censor their actions and expressions, which further promotes a circle of silence and shame.

This stress is aggravated by institutional responses. Cases of police brutality, such as verbal abuse, beatings, and arbitrary arrests, provide continuity to the long-established state-orchestrated violence against the LGBTQIA+ community and give continuity to its institutional discrimination (BDS, 2013; UNDP & USAID, 2014). The accruing minority stress brought about by the state institutions as they reproduce the family-level rejection by discriminatory enforcing mechanisms undermines their psychological security and trust in the formal protection systems. These dynamics are put in the framework of a bigger discussion of online hate, in my thesis, as they mirror and strengthen such processes of rejection and control, as well as transform into places of resistance and self-affirmation by LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Online Spaces and Queer Belonging

Since many LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal face social and familial rejection, online platforms have become essential to most of them to navigate their identities, realize that they are not alone, and get in touch with individuals who share similar experiences (International Alert, 2022). For example, LGBTQIA+ people in the study by Sonnenberg resorted to using computers in cyber cafes and checking Google to learn about gender and sexuality beyond the heteronormative definitions that their parents introduced to them (Sonnenberg, 2018).

Social media plays a central role in these interactions. LGBTQIA+-specific online platforms like Grindr and popular others like Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp are significant spaces where LGBTQIA+ youth can communicate, exchange information, network, and develop a sense of belonging (Sonnenberg, 2018; Sow et al., 2022). Online spaces are also considered to further improve the visibility of activists as well as strategic communication with media (ILGA Asia, 2021).

Nevertheless, the internet is a two-sided sword to the LGBTQIA+ community. Even though it might provide safe havens and allow resistance against the dominant discourses, it can also be oppressive (McKenna & Chughtai, 2020). Adverse experiences like bullying and sexual victimization have also been observed in LGBTQIA + youth, who are more likely to find support and explore themselves online (Alix, 2021). Considering the Minority Stress Theory, online spaces reduce as well as recreate stress. On the one hand, they reduce the immediate stressors, like isolation and internalized stigma as they provide the community solidarity and

emotional support. On the other hand, they also expose users to new distal sources of stress, such as online hate speech, online surveillance, and public outing that may increase hypervigilance and anxiety.

It is against this backdrop that my thesis will examine how online space has worked as a site of safety as well as injury to members of the LGBTQIA+ communities in Nepal, how online belonging intersects with minority stress, and how individuals are managing safety, self-expression, and community amidst queerphobia in online space.

Online Queerphobic Hate Speech

This part provides an overview of how queerphobic hate speech is common in the virtual space of Nepal and how it can impact the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals. It explains the patterns and areas where hate speech occurs and the psychological and emotional effects of hate speech. The literatures also mention the institutional and legislative gaps that enable hate speech and the defensive measures and solidarity among the LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups in Nepal.

Patterns of Online Hate Speech

LGBTQIA+ members of society often get attacked, abused, bullied, and discriminated against by both real and fake social media profiles (Sow et al., 2022). Online violence is also gaining momentum in Nepal, and the data reveals that the percentage of people who have suffered online emotional abuse is alarming, with 54% of LGBTQIA+ individuals having reported such abuse (UN Women 2023). Online queerphobic hate speech occurs in different ways and through different digital platforms, particularly on social media and comment sections (Fladmoe et al., 2019). The vast majority of hate on the internet is committed on Facebook, Twitter, media comment sections, Instagram, YouTube, and dating apps, along with other platforms such as Reddit, Snapchat, blogs, and gaming sites (Hubbard, 2020).

The types of online queerphobic hate speech are not equally common. The most frequent are insults, followed by threats of physical violence, threats of sexual assault, death threats, and threats of outing (Hubbard, 2020). Other forms are harassment, misgendering, disparaging remarks, ridicule, mocking, shaming, suicide baiting, stalking, bullying, defamation, erasure, revenge porn, and deadnaming (Hubbard, 2020). Certain derogatory terms in Nepali, such as "*chhakka*," "*namard*," and "*napungsak*," are commonly used to target LGBTQIA+ people over the internet (Sow et al., 2022). Exposure to such online queerphobic hate speech can trigger

proximal stressors such as hypervigilance, internalized stigma, and self-censorship. Even subtle expressions of hate speech, including implying that LGBTQIA+ people can just decide to alter their gender or sexual orientation, are recognized as harmful, as they negate lived experience and contribute to negative treatments, like conversion therapy (Sinpeng et al., 2021).

The victimization patterns prove LGBTQIA+ individuals are even more vulnerable to hate speech on the internet than heterosexuals and cisgender individuals (Abreu & Kenny, 2017; Keighley, 2022). Transgender people are more likely to be victims of online abuse (93%), than cisgender people (70%) (Hubbard, 2020). Youth and young people aged 18-24 years are more exposed and vulnerable to victimization (Keighley, 2022). As reported by the Nepal Police Headquarters (FY 2080/81), 767 LGBTQIA+ persons were registered as the victims of cybercrime cases and they constituted 3.8 percent of cybercrime victims overall (Women, Children & Senior Citizens Service Directorate, 2024).

Most of the time, the perpetrators of online queerphobic hate speech are not just one person but a group of people (Hubbard, 2020). In most countries, state-owned mass media and social media companies actively promote hate speech, labeling LGBTQIA+ members a “dangerous foreign influence.” (Loft et al., 2022). Although the media in Nepal has enhanced its coverage of the LGBTQIA+ issues, it is limited and, in some cases, fails to provide deep and varied representations of LGBTQIA+ lives, focusing on sensationalized or inaccurate media reports (Syangden, 2018). Media reporting contains a widespread problem in misgendering of particularly transgender people (ILGA Asia, 2021). My thesis places itself in this tension, discussing how online queerphobic hate in Nepal does not only reflect the bias in society, but also adds to the minority stress and, thus, affects the way LGBTQIA+ people use online spaces, define their identities, and find support.

Effects of Online Hate Speech

Spreads of queerphobic hate speech and its reciprocal effects on a person, arising from both direct and general circulation of such content, are closely related to psychological damage that can be both acute and chronic in nature (Nyman & Provozin, 2019). The exposure to online negative content, even if it is only witnessing it, can have a detrimental impact (Alix, 2021). Victims, in general, cite anger, sadness, anxiety, depression, shame, paranoia, and decreased self-esteem (Keighley, 2022; Stefanita & Buf, 2021). According to a study in Pokhara, 27.8% of LGBTQIA+

people reported experiencing depression, and the highest rates were observed in transgender individuals (31.6%) (Thapa et al., 2021). Overall, depression in LGBTQIA+ people is 1.5 to 2.5 times more frequent compared to cisgender and heterosexual people (Thapa et al., 2021).

In terms of Minority Stress Theory, online hate is a distal stressor and its exposure leads to proximal stressors, including internalized queerphobia, meaning that individuals begin experiencing negative feelings about LGBTQIA+ people, which can consequently result in depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Stefanita & Buf, 2021). Being forced to conceal sexual orientation may cause several mental health concerns (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Prejudice continues to bewilder, demoralize, and instill a feeling of shame in LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal (Greene, 2015). In the case of young LGBTQIA+ individuals, these stressors can have larger implications on their life, such as school dropout, substance use, homelessness, and social instability (Keighley, 2022).

The consequences of online hate speech are not limited to the online environment but spread to every sphere of life of a person, affecting their perceptions, physical health, and everyday interactions, and causing a permanent fear of being targeted. It is further worsened by the anonymity that perpetrators enjoy on the internet (Keighley, 2022). Even hate crimes and physical violence are considered to be the precursor of hate speech (Arcila Calderón et al., 2024; Stefanita & Buf, 2021). The family is also affected by online hate speech, as seen in cases of microaggressions against LGBTQIA+ families (Haines et al., 2018). Hate speech is further complicated by caste/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability, with Muslim and Dalit LGBTQIA+ members reporting more prevalence rates of violence (UN Women, 2023). The minority stress is therefore felt unequally among the various intersecting identities of the queer community.

Institutional Gaps

The current systems are often seen as weak or uneven in the LGBTQIA+ community's reaction to online queerphobic hate speech. The data to which the actual prevalence of hate speech can be attributed are often insufficient based on formal crime reports because online hate speech is not systematically registered in the police as frequently as offline crimes (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2016). Online hate speech is also often not legally defined, as it is underestimated in terms of real harm (Keighley, 2022). International researchers have criticized the laws against hate crimes because

they promote stereotypes or pay a disproportionate amount of attention to “stranger danger,” even though in many cases, the crime is committed by a person familiar to the victim (Flores et al., 2022). Furthermore, Nepal does not have specific hate crime laws or anti-discrimination laws to directly protect the LGBTQIA+ community and stop violence against them (Syangden, 2018). These failures at the institution are perceived in the framework of Minority Stress Theory as distal stressors. The invisibility of hate speech in the law and bureaucratic refusal allows online hate speech to legitimize societal bias and further create proximal stressors.

Hate speech is usually moderated by removing, hiding, and reporting comments and user accounts, often by page administrators of LGBTQIA+ groups (Sinpeng et al., 2021). The Terms of Service (TOS) of most Internet Service Providers (ISPs) as well as social media websites such as Facebook, X, and YouTube prohibit hate speech giving the websites the right to remove content, or block accounts (Cohen-Almagor, 2011; Warner & Hirschberg, 2012). The major tech companies have pledged to revise and delete illegal materials in 24 hours in allegiance to the EU Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online (2016) (Williams & Mishcon de Reya, n. d.). Regardless of such initiatives, there is still a significant amount of hate speech content on the internet. The internal policies of Facebook tend to miss the local contexts, and the LGBTQIA+ community cites fatigue and disempowerment due to automated responses and the absence of follow-ups (Sinpeng et al., 2021). Additionally, many victims are unaware of reporting tools (Hubbard, 2020). The lack of relevant legislation to combat cyberbullying and hate speech on the internet in Nepal has a disproportionate impact on LGBTQIA+ people (Sow et al., 2022). My dissertation hence places itself in this institutional gap for investigating the impact of structural negligence in curbing online hate against LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nepal.

Defense Mechanisms

LGBTQIA+ people use various coping strategies to overcome online queerphobic hate speech. The coping strategies used by many include cutting usage of the internet, tightening privacy controls, blocking people, or quitting online discussions to reduce further harm (Hubbard, 2020). Others cope with it through social withdrawal and isolation, and they can be transferred into the offline world and disrupt identity formation and peer development (Keighley, 2022). The rest of them justify the abuse by not reporting it or self-censoring by hiding identity to obtain

social acceptance (Stefanita & Buf, 2021). These responses, in relation to Minority Stress Theory, are symptoms of internalized processes built up because of constant exposure to distal stressors, such as structural stigma, cyberbullying, and institutional abandonment. Online hate can also cause desensitization and underreporting of victims due to the anonymity of the online hate perpetrators (Nyman & Provozin, 2019).

Irrespective of the ongoing adversities, the LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nepal have exercised a sense of resilience about their right to live with dignity and fearlessness (Sonnenberg, 2018). It is also of paramount relevance that the buffering activity of ameliorative factors such as social support, identity pride and community connectedness take place. According to activists, hate speech can in fact make them more resolute to engage in LGBTQIA+ affairs and activism online to seek retaliation and assist others (Keighley, 2022; Nyman & Provozin, 2019). Victims of violence are usually first approached by LGBTQIA+ organizations (UN Women, 2023). The NGOs based in Nepal, such as the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), have been offering HIV prevention, legal advice, human rights advocacy, and community outreach services to the LGBTQIA+ community (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Activists also use mainstream media to bring attention to human rights abuses and positively report on events such as yearly pride parades (Acharya, 2019). Other initiatives go further to LGBTQIA+ radio programs (UNDP & USAID, 2014), local literature, online tools in Nepali and local languages, and growing online resources (ILGA Asia, 2021).

Therefore, online queerphobic hate speech may be a source of chronic distal stress, but the collective and identity-affirming reactions of LGBTQIA+ communities in Nepal exemplify the ameliorative mechanisms in the Minority Stress framework. This demonstrates that the minority stress can be turned into agency and belonging through social connection, activism and resilience.

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter gives in-depth details about the methodology used, the process of selecting the study site, the research design, primary and secondary data used, the process of data collection and analysis, the trustworthiness of the study, and the ethical considerations applied.

Research Design

In this study, the research design is an interpretive research design that entails in-depth interviews with the research participants. The interpretivist epistemology posits that knowledge is not an objective, single reality to be quantified, but rather acquired through the interpretation and understanding of human actions, experiences, and environments (Sol & Heng, 2022). Considering the complexity of people and social phenomena, interpretivism suggests that there is typically more than one truth and that reality is socially constructed (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Such an approach was appropriate because the study attempted to grasp the truth of discrimination and the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in Nepal.

Study Site

The research was conducted among LGBTQIA+ youths between the ages of 18-24 years in Kathmandu Valley of Bagmati Province that included Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur districts. Kathmandu district was the most populous and densely populated out of 77 districts (2,041,587) according to the National Census of 2021, and Bagmati Province was the most populous (20.97%) of the national population (National Statistics Office, 2023). Youths aged 18-24 years were selected as research participants due to their status of being the heaviest internet and social media users, 93% of whom use these platforms every day (Carcelén-García et al., 2023). Their overuse of digital features, excessive confidence in the virtual space, and ignorance of the risks of online actions contribute to the vulnerability to cyber harms (Setopati, 2019). The age group also has a disproportionate exposure to online queerphobic hate speech, exposing them to the social and psychological effects of hate speech (Keighley, 2022). A large number of LGBTQIA+ youth move towards

Kathmandu Valley in search of anonymity, community, and digital and organizational access.

Although the 2021 National Census has attracted controversy due to the inclusion of the 'other' gender marker to tally all LGBTQIA+ individuals that critics argued erased SOGIESC diversity (Khadgi, 2021), the census found that 32.7% of all individuals identifying with the ‘other’ gender marker lived in Bagmati Province, the largest proportion of all provinces (National Statistics Office, 2023). The Kathmandu Valley was thus chosen as a major location to understand the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people.

Since key queer-rights-based national organizations, including the Blue Diamond Society (BDS) and Mitini Nepal, are located in Kathmandu (Syangden, 2018; UN Women et al., 2023), participants could be selected more conveniently. Public displays of visibility are also found in the Kathmandu Valley with the annual pride parades and frequent LGBTQIA+ gatherings (UNDP & USAID, 2014). The study site offered a comparative site to study changing attitudes based on both global and domestic factors. Despite the appeal brought by Kathmandu’s pluralism and urbanism among LGBTQIA+ individuals from rural areas (Ojha, 2024a), where urban life is seen as more accepting (Boyce & Coyle, 2013), past research indicates that LGBTQIA+ people in the Kathmandu Valley continue to face rights violations (Singh et al., 2012). This further highlights the need to investigate the issue on a deeper and more systematic level.

Data Collection Procedure

An in-depth interview is a qualitative method of research, which is applied to make in-depth discussions with a small number of participants to gather their subjective experience and inferred meaning regarding a topic (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). I used face-to-face and online in-depth interviews with ten LGBTQIA+ youths, who were willing to participate in the study. The participants selected the interview venues to provide privacy and security. Each of the sessions lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were held in Nepali and English, depending on the convenience of the participants.

I adapted the interview guide from Nyman and Provozin’s (2019) work on the harmful effects of online and offline anti-LGBTI hate speech, with modifications to suit the Nepal context and the specific research questions of this thesis (see Appendix for the complete interview guide). The in-depth interviews explored new themes and

were consistent among the participants. The interviews were discussed as rich case narratives and focused on the voices of the participants, their experiences, and understandings. The Minority Stress Theory (MST) was frequently applied in this respect to elucidate the impact of structural and social stressors on participants, the dynamics of power between them, and the process by which participants respond and cope with marginalization.

Considering the sensitivity of dealing with a marginalized population and the slow pace of selecting participants through community networks, the selection of ten research participants was considered adequate. Notably, the thematic saturation was achieved after ten interviews, which indicated that the number was adequate to achieve the study objectives.

Informed consent was obtained before the commencement of the interviews (see Appendix for the consent form template). Interviews were audio-recorded on a mobile phone so as to be accurate when transcribing and analyzing the interviews. The timeframe of data collection was between November 2023 and December 2024.

Participant Selection

The research used a combination of a purposive and snowball approach to select ten respondents who self-identified as LGBTQIA+ individuals and had experienced or had witnessed online queerphobic hate speech. Diversity in sexual orientation and gender identities, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans men, trans women, and non-binary individuals, was included through purposive selection.

The inclusion criteria included participants' age between 18 to 24 years old and self-identification as LGBTQIA+ with a residence in the Kathmandu Valley at the time of data collection.

The table provided below summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants involved in this study. In order to protect the privacy of all participants, all of them are referred by pseudonym that does not distort the distinctiveness of their life stories. The table below gives the main identifiers, including gender identity, sexual orientation, pronouns, age, location, and outness level of the study participants.

Table 1

Participant Matrix

S.N.	Participant Id	Gender Identity / Sexual Orientation	Pronouns	Age	Location	Outness Level (Public/Private)
1	Joshan	Gay cisgender man	He/Him	24	Kathmandu-based	Semi-public (out to selective friends and relatives)
2	Rohit	Gay cisgender man	He/Him	24	Originally from a rural village, living in Kathmandu	Semi-public (out to a few trusted circles)
3	Neel	Gay cisgender man	He/Him	23	Kathmandu-based	Semi-public (out to selective friends)
4	Sangat	Queer (Gender nonconforming, AMAB)	They/Them	20	Kathmandu-based	Semi-public (out on private Instagram with selective friends)
5	Kiran	Queer (Gender nonconforming, AMAB)	They/Them	23	Originally from a rural village, living in Kathmandu	Semi-public (out to some extended family and in professional circles, not out to immediate family)

6	Anita	Bisexual cisgender woman	She/Her	19	Kathmandu-based	Semi-public (out to immediate family and on social media, not out to extended family)
7	Ashwin	Trans man	He/Him	20	Kathmandu-based	Public
8	Madhu	Trans man	He/Him	19	Kathmandu-based	Public
9	Anshu	Trans woman	She/Her	19	Originally from a rural village, living in Kathmandu	Semi-public (out to sister and queer friends, not out to parents and extended family)
10	Shweta	Lesbian cisgender woman	She/Her	19	Kathmandu-based	Public

These participants collectively constitute a diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities, and social positions, as they illustrate the heterogeneity of queer experiences in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal.

Data Analysis Procedure

I used the Thematic Analysis (TA) approach to identify, analyze, and report patterns in the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the six-step model of thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006). The six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke are a systematic process of familiarizing data, developing codes, searching themes, reviewing, defining/naming themes and completing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The framework provides a flexible yet reasonably organized pattern identification and interpretation of diverse qualitative data and guarantees rigor, transparency, and reflexivity (Ahmed et al., 2025).

As most of the interviews were in Nepali, the transcripts were closely translated into English. All personal identities were eliminated to ensure confidentiality, and the names of the participants were substituted with pseudonyms and demographic characteristics (as shown in Table 1, Participant Matrix).

The analysis was done in an iterative manner. I began to read the transcripts carefully and repeatedly to immerse myself in the stories of the participants and highlight the first impressions, general patterns, and emotionally important moments. I then developed first codes, which were categories of meaningful textual units systematically categorized to represent the experience of the online queerphobic hate speech, coping strategies, and experience with institutional support among the participants.

These codes were semantic, that is, explicit, as in, "I blocked the user" or "I was anxious due to the comment," and latent, including particular emotions or social processes, such as anticipatory fear, internalized shame, or systemic-neglect perception. As an example, the description of a participant who was always checking comment sections was coded as both hypervigilance (latent) and online monitoring behavior (semantic).

I then sorted out codes into initial themes based on connections, contrasts, and overlaps. As an example, codes concerning online harassment, emotional distress, and spillover to offline space were combined under the theme "Digital Distal Stressors," whereas codes pertaining to support networks, emotional disengagement, and collective coping comprised the theme "Resilience Tactics."

Themes were refined and labeled to mirror the essence of lived experiences of the participants. As an example, a theme that was earlier identified as "Dealing with Hate Online" was changed to "Strategic Coping and Resistance" after member checking revealed that the participants focused not on passive endurance but on agency. The themes were also clearly attributed to the research questions and objectives of my thesis, granting the analytical coherence and relevance to the Minority Stress framework as well as to the Nepali LGBTQIA+ context.

The personal and intimate insights in the study were achieved through a mixture of paraphrasing, verbatim quotes, and detailed case stories of the in-depth interviews.

Quality Standard

Trustworthiness is central in determining the validity and reliability of qualitative results, particularly due to the subjective aspect of studying the complex nature of human behavior, attitudes, and experiences (Ahmed, 2024). In order to achieve rigorous standards, a model of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability was introduced by Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Trustworthiness played a significant role in this research study and the following sections explain how the various aspects of the framework were applied to achieve rigor and integrity in the research.

Credibility

Credibility is one of the dimensions of qualitative research that describes the degree to which the results reflect the lived realities of the participants (Ahmed, 2024). It is believed to be the qualitative analogue of the internal validity of quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

There were various ways that credibility was boosted in this study. The context-rich description of discrimination, exclusion, and resilience was gathered through the in-depth interviews. I also engaged in reflexive practices where I was actively questioning personal biases and assumptions but remained open minded.

The methodology was transparent because the theoretical frameworks and methodologies, including the use of Thematic Analysis and the Minority Stress Theory, were described clearly. The triangulation of the interpretations and the minimization of any kind of bias was achieved by means of cross-referencing various secondary sources of literature and member checking. Member checking was performed under the supervision of five participants that reviewed initial themes and interpretations. Their comments prompted me to explain unclear accounts, change labels of the themes to reflect lived experience more accurately, and be sensitive to shared experiences without extrapolation.

The findings were presented in the form of verbatim quotes, paraphrasing and case stories in order to improve credibility and make sure that the voices of the participants were accurately represented. The purposive selection of the participants with diverse SOGIESC identities was also successful in capturing the intersectional viewpoints causing more inclusive representation of the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ people in Kathmandu Valley. All these measures helped to make the study results accurate, credible and rich.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree of extrapolation, generalization, or application of the research findings to other contexts or situations (Ahmed, 2024). External validity or generalizability is a concept that is equivalent to transferability in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Because the aim of interpretivist research is not to make a statistical generalization, transferability is achieved through a presentation of contextual details that enables the readers, subsequent researchers, or policymakers to evaluate how the results can be applied in their own context.

The approach in this study achieved transferability by providing a thick description of the study setting, participant characteristics, and findings, thus making informed conclusions regarding relevance. Purposive and snowball selection of research participants was used to capture various experiences, and the highest degree of variation and depth were realized through theoretical saturation in order to make the data representative. To maintain the integrity of academic learning, the threats to transferability such as the purposive selection of the ten research participants was addressed directly.

Dependability

Dependability is associated with the possibility of receiving the same results in case the study is replicated, all conditions being the same (Enworo, 2023). In quantitative research, the term dependability corresponds to the notion of reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

The research process was intended to be logical, transparent, and traceable to ensure dependability, establishing coherence between findings and methods. The audit trail was kept with close attention to the documents that record the collection of data (interview guide as shown in Appendix), the procedure of transcription and translation (interview transcripts), and the procedure of the thematic analysis (coding, categorization, and theme development). There was a focus on methodological documentation to ensure increased transparency and the possibility of replicating or evaluating the process externally.

Confirmability

The term confirmability implies the objectivity and impartiality of research findings, meaning that they are based on the accounts of participants and not subject to bias caused by the researcher (Ahmed, 2024). It is a qualitative equivalent of objectivity in quantitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and demonstrates that

interpretations are actually created out of the data (Liamputtong, 2019, as cited in Ahmed, 2024).

I approached the topic based on my professional experience as I worked with civil society organizations in Nepal regarding gender-based violence, digital violence, and the rights of children and youth. My experiences influenced my understanding of online harassment and its psychosocial effects and directed the focus of this research as I continued to make a conscious effort to prevent my own views from affecting the analysis.

As a way of improving confirmability, I used peer debriefing with a practitioner in an LGBTQIA+ rights organization and a researcher in the field of online safety on several rounds. Their comments aided me in revising the methodology, including the creation of a participant matrix to put gender, age and outness levels into context and how sensitive quotes are to be displayed.

Finally, I strengthened confirmability through triangulation, comparing findings across multiple participant narratives and secondary literature. In sum, all these measures served to ensure that the results were reflective of the realities of the LGBTQIA+ study participants, and not my perceptions and assumptions.

Ethical Consideration

One of the most significant elements of this study was ethical integrity due to the sensitivity of the topic, as well as the vulnerability of the LGBTQIA+ community. The research was conducted under the principle of "Do No harm," as the safety, dignity, and psychological health of the participants were considered at all steps. This study received Kathmandu University's approval and complied with the ethical provisions of conducting a social science study.

Before every interview, the participants were briefed in a transparent and neutral way about the study objectives, the scope, and the methodology used in the study. Both participation and audio recording were obtained through the participant's informed consent (see Appendix for the consent form template). They were guaranteed freedom of participation and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequence.

To protect their identities, the names of all participants in transcripts and reports were pseudonymized, and no personal information, including addresses, schools, or workplaces, was recorded. It was stored securely in files that could be accessed by the researcher only with the help of a password. The interviews were

conducted in non-judgmental and safe environments, including online settings, to ensure privacy and comfortable settings.

I upheld the integrity of the researcher by being reflexive, understanding that the likelihood of bias was present, and making sure that the results represented the voice of the research subjects well and not my beliefs and perceptions. The participants were made aware that the information they provided would only be utilized in an academic sense and that the final report would be availed in Kathmandu University library, thereby providing transparency in the utilization and publication of the information.

CHAPTER IV
ADVERSITIES OF ONLINE QUEERPHOBIC HATE SPEECH

Overview

This chapter deals with my first research question on how LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal experience online queerphobic hate speech and how they locate their emotional, social, and daily lives. This chapter includes the key themes that have been identified by the analysis, supported by the voices of the participants in the form of quotes and case stories. The next sections include the key themes that have been identified by the analysis, and these themes are supported by the voices of the participants in the form of quotes and case stories. When revisiting these narratives, I refer to Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) to look at the functioning of online hostility in the form of both external (distal) sources of stress and how the hostility influences internalized fear, hypervigilance, and identity-related shame among participants.

Forms of Hate Speech

Participants associated many forms of digital violence, from hateful comments and memes made to mock LGBTQIA+ people to the emotional burden of being visible online and being directly harassed and exploited. This hate was largely contributed to by young, educated, and tech-savvy people who mostly concealed their names behind anonymous or spam social media accounts. Perpetrators were peers, strangers, and in some cases, even the members of the queer community and allies. Participants felt anxious because anyone, from strangers to friends, could be a perpetrator, intensifying proximal stressors such as vigilance and expectation of rejection.

Hate in Comment Sections

The comment sections of Nepali social media, especially on posts related to LGBTQIA+ topics, were perceived to be the most aggressive and emotionally charged zones for queerphobic hate speech. Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly pointed toward platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok as primary sites of hate speech. They reported that hate comments flourished, especially on news or meme pages across digital platforms. These digital spaces functioned as distal stressors within Meyer's Minority Stress Theory. Nevertheless, the emotional

reactions of the participants demonstrate how these external stressors were turned into internal pressures, which defined their self-worth, authenticity, and online safety.

> *If you go to some pages like NQD or WOB [names changed due to confidentiality], if they post about LGBTQ month or same-sex marriage, all you will see are negative comments there. There are like 90% negative comments. The comments are very degrading, very disgusting, and sometimes it feels like they don't even see LGBTQ people as human beings. They see us as criminals. (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

> *Let's take an example, this big famous social media page posts something related to Pride, or let's say legalizing gay marriage, there are a lot of hate comments under such posts. This makes me feel very sad. (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

> *If some top news platform just keeps the photo of a rainbow without any caption on its thumbnail, you will know what amount of hate comments come from the people. (Kiran, 23, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)*

Participants who were openly out on social media often encountered direct hate under their posts.

"In my case, if one person is commenting positive things under my TikTok video, the rest five will be negative." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

The experience Anita shares emphasizes that visibility increases vulnerability, bringing to the fore the experience of proximal stressors building up in individuals who do not conceal their identities on the internet.

The comments often extended beyond slurs, using nationalistic and moralistic rhetoric to deny queer identity.

> *They are just hating for the sake of hating, calling out slurs like 'chhakka'. People have also said that this [being gay] is like a new religion and we are just extremists, like everybody is going to turn gay if this goes on, and that this is American mainstream society's and media's influence. (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

For some participants, hate was not only present but disturbingly normalized, especially from their own peer group. Even emoji reactions like angry or laughing emojis on queer-supportive posts carried the weight of silent queerphobia.

"Even if I just post a flag, there will be comments, some negative and some positive. My own friends have commented on bad things, 'Are you this and that?' linking me to abnormality." (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)

"They [my classmates] reacted angrily, laughingly on Facebook posts [related to LGBTQIA+ people]. Even if they are not vocalizing it [hate speech], it's clear they don't accept queer identity."

The closeness of the perpetrators as classmates, friends, and family added another layer of emotional complexity. For Anshu, the attacks often took place not in public comments, but in private messages, making them harder to ignore.

"They don't even comment, they just send messages right away in Messenger. They share [with me] the posts in Messenger and ridicule me in direct messages." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

Many participants, like Madhu, who practiced digital self-censorship as a conscious attempt to avoid becoming a target, recognized the broader consequences of hate speech.

"Consequences of such online abuse can also result in suicide. The comments can affect you mentally and can lead you to take your own life."

Participants also pointed out that the constant visibility of hate, even when not personally directed, affects self-worth and visibility choices for closeted individuals.

"It's not only me who is getting affected [by online hate speech], but it's the whole queer community getting affected by it." (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

"A lot of closeted people are not accepting even of themselves because of online hate comments, even if it is not personally directed at them." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Another proximal stress pathway found by Neel was vicarious trauma, in which observing hate directed at others led to self-doubt and internalized fear.

Overall, hate in online commentaries became a predominant type of distal minority stress in the digital environment of Nepal, which influenced not only the immediate emotional conditions but also the subsequent psychological mechanisms of hypervigilance, identity concealment, and internalized stigma.

Humor and Memes Masking Queerphobia

The participants felt that humor is not always harmless in Nepali digital spaces. For queer individuals navigating the internet, especially younger people, humor was a weaponized form of queerphobia. It appeared as satire or wit but was widely used to mock, ridicule, and dehumanize queer identities. The participants stressed that for many meme creators and consumers, especially in male-dominated online spaces, queerness had become the default punchline. Terms like *"G-Pay"* and *"Gand-Pay"* reflected a meme trend where they used wordplay to mock queer identities under the disguise of harmless fun.

> *One of the recurring memes is around this topic [being queer]. And most of the humor comes from this. So, this [being queer] is treated as a very humorous type of thing. They use words like G-Pay and Gand-Pay. Either it [queer identity] is used as a mockery or it is labelled as a disgusting, vile type of thing. (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

These jokes were often rooted in vulgar puns. While they were not explicit threats, they reinforced the idea that queerness is inherently laughable or deviant.

> *In the meme materials, like in TikTok, queer people's pictures are used to ridicule feminine boys. They show queer people in a bad sense, not in a good sense. They always show trans women as people in red-light areas. But people choose to ignore why trans people are forced to do that. The cis-het community refuses to accept them and then somehow shows them as destructors of society. (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)*

Anita, a bisexual woman active on social media, also faced meme-based attacks after posting a TikTok video during Pride month. One of the TikToks she recorded about Pride with a friend was downloaded and reshared, receiving more than a million views but largely negative feedback. An innocent, joyful post was turned into viral mockery. Here, memes were used not to entertain but to degrade and turn the joys of queer people into shame.

"People downloaded my video from TikTok and started making memes and posting on Facebook." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Importantly, humor was often passive-aggressive, wrapped in a thin veil of sarcasm or irony. Sangat shared a case of being targeted on their college confession page with an anonymous post referencing their Pride appearance.

"A college student wrote on the internet targeting me, 'What does it mean to wear the Superman cape [mocking the Pride flag] in Diversity Day? Does it mean there's a new culture in the world?" (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Such hate posts used mockery and irony to make queerphobic hate seem socially acceptable. Perpetrators often dismissed it as *"just a joke",* which made it harder for victims to confront them. In such cases, humor became a shield for discrimination.

"It's not slurs. It's more of a subtle level of hate speech. It's a well-sentenced hate speech. It is only a joke or meme, they say. But it's meant to ridicule. When we respond, we're told we're overreacting." (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Participants reflected on the casualness with which these jokes circulated among friends and peers. Even within intimate digital circles, homophobic memes were passed around without reflection. Participants noted that such humor was especially common in all-male friend circles.

> *Mostly, it [homophobia] is seen as humor. This is one of the cornerstones of their humor. When you run out of jokes, there is this [homophobic] joke that always gets a laugh. So, you see these [homophobic jokes] in boys' circles. That is the kind of humor. When my friends sent me those kinds of memes [mocking gay people], I used to go paranoid: 'Are they on to something? Do they know who I am? (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

The normalization of this ridicule led queer people to self-monitor and question their safety in even close relationships. Many participants described the impact of such humor as not immediately violent but persistently exhausting. This continuous depletion is an expression of the accumulative pressure of minority stress, in which daily micro-humor is transformed into the permanent effect on the psyche. It created a surrounding where queer people must anticipate how any online gesture, be it fashion, jokes, dance, or opinion, might be taken out of context, turned into a meme, and circulated for ridicule.

Visibility and Vulnerability

In Nepal's digital spaces, visibility was seen as both empowering and risky for queer individuals. Expressing gender or sexual identity online was an act of pride, affirmation, or activism. However, it also brought harassment, surveillance, forced

outing, and reputational harm. Many participants reported being constantly watched, judged, or attacked by both strangers and people they know. The need to be visible and the fear of being exposed rendered the digital space draining, which exemplifies the conflict between authenticity and safety that Minority Stress Theory labels a proximal stressor (expectation of rejection).

"After I came out and started using rainbow flags in my social media, I started to get constant hate comments." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Sangat distinguished between Instagram, where they were proudly out as queer, and Facebook, where they remained hidden due to fear of being monitored by relatives. They worried about being outed through screenshots if someone they didn't trust got access to their private social media. This platform-switching represents a type of hypervigilance where careful attention is given to audiences to prevent damage.

> *They might screenshot my post [related to being queer] and use it against me at some point. They might show it to my family members. Maybe in the future, let's say there's a fight between us, they can use it against me then. (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)*

Anshu, a trans woman, shared how her posts on Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram were regularly monitored by relatives, villagers, and family members. Online spaces often acted like a surveillance system, where gender non-conformity was closely watched and reported back to family.

> *Outsiders, like people from the village, relatives, and friends, are the ones who feel negative and talk badly. 'What kind of TikTok did you make? What kind of story are you posting? Why are you posting like a girl?' My relatives will call my parents to complain about me. They say, 'Look at what your son is doing. Why is he posting weird and abnormal things?' Then my mom starts to call me and interrogates me: 'Why are you being like this? (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)*

For Anita, a bisexual woman, visibility also meant unwanted exposure and misunderstanding. A simple couple-style TikTok video with a friend raised suspicion and led to a confrontation at home.

"My sister questioned me, 'What kind of video [referring to the queer-themed TikTok video] did you just post?' I was taken aback and couldn't find words to speak."

For queer individuals, digital expressions were interpreted, interrogated, and frequently punished. Sangat explained that posts that included queer-coded fashion such as nail paint, accessories, and makeup were monitored, gossiped, and potentially publicized outing (in a manner akin to pranking) of people who were not entirely out. This demonstrates how visibility turns into a liability, creating an atmosphere of self-monitoring, which is in line with the concept of chronic vigilance proposed by MST.

Joshan described a case that happened to a well-known TikToker trans woman where a video of her being assaulted went viral online and the impact that watching the video had on him. Joshan responded by tracing the harassers' social media and reporting their profiles. The observation of violence against visible queer people served as a vicarious stressor, influencing the manner in which other people measured their safety on the internet.

"Two people come to her [the trans woman] in the middle of the road, start yelling, cursing, and calling her disgusting queerphobic names. I saw the videos on TikTok. I felt extremely bad." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Neel explained that just seeing what happens to visible queer people online can be discouraging. Watching the backlash in comment sections and viral videos shaped self-perception and made others less willing to express themselves.

Even participants who were not directly attacked, like Ashwin, who came out on national television, were highly aware of the risks. He referred to a particular case of a YouTube video publicly exposing queer youth in their own interest, and making their daily lives a scandal. Queer experiences were often displayed as bait to scale up the level of content interaction as compared to treating it sensitively.

Abuse, Threats, and Exploitation

Digital hostility often went beyond passive aggression. It became direct harassment and psychological threats, and even grooming particularly with younger and more visible participants who were queer.

Anita faced organized harassment through fake accounts and group chats.

"A person would use slurs and bully me and then unsend messages. They would add me to group chats and, together with others, bully me." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

She reported such instances, yet nothing was done about them.

Anshu was also constantly harassed by a stalker who kept creating new accounts.

"No matter how many times I block this one person, they create a different account and send me messages and pester me." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

These interactions erased the boundary between the digital and physical safety. Respondents remembered their initial experiences of finding queer identity on the internet by creating fake identities and unregulated spaces. Kiran, who had been raised in the digital era with minimal sex education or support, had a recollection of being catfished. They thought they were talking to a person of their age and even developed romantic affection. But when they met in person, the individual was much older, nearly Kiran's father's age.

"Looking back now, I feel like I was exploited. I'm not even sure if I was talking online to someone older than my father. Curiosity sometimes impairs our judgment." (Kiran, 23, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Anshu said that her emotional openness made her prey to predatory actions. She remembered encountering a man using a fake profile who attempted to seduce her with costly items such as cameras and phones.

"He said he'll buy me this, buy me that. I deleted my account later." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

Ashwin, a trans man, pointed out that queer individuals often faced invasive and pornographic curiosity forced upon them, especially during public interviews or in online content.

> *I see in many interviews related to queer people, and the first thing that interviewers ask them is how they have sex. People see us, and the first thing they want to know is about our sex positions. Even asking that type of question is a form of abuse. (Ashwin, 20, trans man, publicly out)*

This highlights the way in which objectification and sexualization work as distal stressors that result in internalized scrutiny and caution among queer people.

Perpetrators and Carriers of Online Hate

Participants said most hate came from young, educated, and tech-savvy people who held social influence. Many perpetrators also hid behind anonymous or spam accounts with no profile pictures or posts. Young people online often saw being

homophobic as “cool,” and some used strict religious beliefs to justify hostility toward LGBTQIA+ individuals.

> *I would say it’s [the online hate speech is] more from the younger group because they are more active in social media. (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*
>
> *The people who are hating in the comment section, they're not even older generation people. It's always the people of my same age group or younger. Our country's future is hard. (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)*
>
> *Some people are just from fake accounts. They don’t even have pictures, just blank, and they comment on worse insults. Even if it’s a blank profile, the languages they use are very teenage. It’s very early 20s. They use the words of the Gen Z. They feel that being homophobic is a very good thing, and a cool thing, and an empowering thing to do. (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*
>
> *Most of those who are young also have radical thoughts and ideas. Young people who are religious in a conservative way talk about how humanity needs to be protected, like being gay would cause humans to become extinct. (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

Sangat noted that queerphobic hate often came from peers and former classmates, not just strangers. They highlighted that such hate is reinforced when others like, share, or comment on hate posts. Hate also came from within the queer community. Participants described being judged or shamed by fellow LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies for being more visible or outspoken.

“There is also a lot of internalized views. Even allies have backbitten us.” (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

“People from my own community [queer community] bash me for posting openly, saying Why am I expressing myself online for the world to see? '” (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

The experiences of the participants point to intra-community policing whereby the members of LGBTQIA+ community impose wider social prejudices upon the group, occasionally by passing judgment or shaming. This demonstrates that hate and stigma are not necessarily external but also internalized among the community members.

This section demonstrates that the perpetrators of online hate are not only strangers, but also peers and family members, generating both overlapping distal and proximal stressors, increasing vigilance, internal stigma, and the psychological burden of the Minority Stress Theory.

The Online-Offline Nexus of Queerphobia

Participants provided information regarding the interrelation between the nature of online and offline queerphobia. The queer people's nonconformity to gender norms in social and family lives led to daily discrimination, microaggressions, and direct violence. The internet's presence has mostly increased the dangers for them. The participants explained that posts, pictures, and videos posted on social media could be shared and ridiculed, causing harassment, damage to reputation, and socio-cultural isolation. This illustrates how the distal online stressors leak into offline space to provide overlapping conditions of threat and stigma.

Everyday Queerphobia in Public Spaces

Across participants, gender expression emerged as the main trigger for public queerphobia. Femininity in AMAB individuals and masculinity in AFAB individuals were often enough to draw attention and stigma.

Joshan, a femme gay man, though not publicly out, explained that his femininity was often enough for people to assume his sexuality and be called out. Despite being closeted to most of his family and community, his mannerisms made him hyper-visible in school and neighborhood contexts. The schoolboys and neighborhood peers subjected him to slurs like *"chhakka"*, and public ridicule was common.

"I was going home. They [neighborhood boys] started shouting 'C-word' at me, and they laughed and went inside. I felt so hurt. I went home, and I cried." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

The queerphobia was not always direct. Small gestures and expressions could still make individuals feel excluded and despised.

"It didn't have to be bullying. You just kind of feel it [queerphobia]. You know, you sort of feel that just with their gestures and even their expressions." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

The stereotypical gendering continued up to salons, transport, schools, and shops. Anita, a bisexual woman who wore a tomboyish style and had a short hairstyle, described that her masculine presentation always resulted in misgendering and

microaggression. In a bus, strangers checked her looks and her identity, which made her feel out of place.

"The conductor assumed I was a boy and kept on asking me to leave the [female] seat. Since I look like a boy and my voice is that of a girl, people make comments on my gender with a very insulting tone." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

In mundane spaces like barber shops, Anita was interrogated for her non-conforming looks.

"The barber said, 'You are a girl, and you come to cut your hair short every time. Don't your parents tell you anything?'" (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Several participants described schools and colleges as central sites of gendered discipline, where queerphobia came out not only from peers but also from teachers, administrators, and institutional culture itself.

For Madhu, a trans man, this stereotyping was institutionalized. His school principal's wife made queerphobic remarks and scolded him after he cut his hair.

> *She [principal's wife] berated me, 'You cut your hair today, someone else will cut her hair tomorrow. We cannot see this abnormality spread because of you.' I didn't cry; I never cry in front of anyone. I was speechless. After that day, I didn't want to come out of my room. (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)*

Similarly, the Vice Principal of Anita's college trivialized queerness and linked it to physical contamination.

"The Vice Principal responded, 'Nowadays people have started eating broiler chicken a lot so that might be increasing the population of abnormal people [queer people] now.'"

Several participants experienced overt bullying from peers, made worse by institutional inaction or normalization. Anshu, a trans woman, was bullied so severely that she dropped out of school.

"Boys in my school used to comment on me [for my feminine expression]. The boys from my class would not let me sit with them. I stopped going there altogether." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

Likewise, Joshan experienced verbal harassment at school for his feminine behavior. During a dance competition, he was harassed by hostel boys.

During the dance rehearsal, I was practicing after school. I was more visible, and I was more out there in front of them, so it kind of escalated. You know, it kind of gave them the power like, 'Okay, this guy is always there, so I'm just gonna take advantage [and tease him].' So, it [verbal harassment] just happened. (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Rohit also reported stereotyping based on voice and fashion during his college years.

"So, I had this pink t-shirt. I just wore that. And then, they [college mates] started labelling me. Like, this is a girl's color, why are you wearing it?" (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Even in Ashwin's case, who experienced relative acceptance, public spaces like toilets and clothing stores became challenging.

"People stare at me until I come out of the toilet. They don't show me the clothes I prefer to wear in the clothing stores." (Ashwin, 20, trans man, publicly out)

Ashwin avoided new barbers unless he could first clarify his identity and expectations to avoid being touched inappropriately or misgendered.

"During Dashain and Tihar, my regular barber shop closes, and I refrain from going to another shop. I don't care if my hair gets very long during that time." (Ashwin, 20, trans man, publicly out)

(Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out) described witnessing her visibly queer friend being verbally attacked near a bus station while waiting for the public bus.

"A group of college boys passed by and commented with hatred: 'Eww, I thought it was a boy, but it turns out to be a girl.'" (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)

These public encounters were marked by cultural hostility toward gender nonconforming appearances. Even though the comment was not directed at (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out), the threat was felt by the whole community.

These narratives indicate that online and offline queerphobia work in a vicious circle: the distal stressors (public ridicule, microaggressions, and institutional harassment) cause the proximal stress processes of hypervigilance, self-monitoring, and internalized stigma. The ongoing bargain of visibility and safety, both online and offline, is the classic example of the chronic burden of the Minority Stress Theory as

it details how Nepali LGBTQIA+ youth make their way through the pervasive spaces of threat as they seek affirmation and belonging.

Queerphobia at Home

For many participants, family was both a place of care and a source of control. Queerphobia at home showed up as outright violence and subtle suppression. Many, like Joshan and Neel, stayed silent or vague about their identities out of fear of losing family ties.

> *There's just a fear about what will happen if I come out [as gay] to my parents or what if society knows about me." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*
>
> *In my family and people in my kinship, I haven't shared it [being gay] with anyone. Even if I do tell my friends, it should be either really close friends or queer friends." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

Neel described his home as a space where queerness was both unimaginable and actively erased. Every day, queerphobic remarks from family made prejudice feel normal and constant.

Others, like Madhu, Anshu, and Anita, faced open rejection, especially for their gender expression. Madhu recalled a turning point when he wore his brother's clothes instead of feminine ones, but this self-expression led to exclusion from family events.

"They [my parents] were in discomfort on how to address me. Eventually, they said, 'Enough of this! A cow by birth cannot turn into an ox. We cannot tolerate this anymore.'" (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)

For many queer individuals, home was not a safe space, as family members often used slurs at them.

"Since my childhood, they [family members] insulted and named me immoral words like hijada, chhaka, and kinnar." (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)

Some participants experienced more direct and violent repression, where family members used physical punishment. Anshu's father punished her physically because he could not accept her femininity and love for dance.

"Right on the day of the dance event, my father used to tear all my clothes, burn the costumes, and lock me up in the house." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

Similarly, Anita faced ridicule for a haircut that defied gender norms.

"I went bald. My mom didn't speak with me for a month. They say that if they had dressed me as a girl when I was young, I would have been a girl today." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

For many queer individuals, being visible online led to exclusion from important community spaces and rituals, such as festivals, religious events, *guthi* membership, or neighborhood gatherings.

> *If I come out, I will be the first person to come out in my society, especially in the Newari community. So, it's going to be very hard for me. You have to collaborate with your society members, go to guthis and jatras. If I come out, I know I won't be called for those things. She [my mother] told me, 'Because you were a feminine guy from childhood, they are going to speak more badly [if you say you like men]. (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out).*
>
> *During family events, they don't call me anymore. Earlier, I was asked to help take care of younger cousins; now they avoid me. (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)*
>
> *My parents told me they won't issue me citizenship through their names after my sister outed me [as lesbian]. (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)*

Home, instead of providing protection and amelioration, was another source of chronic stress in MST terms, intensifying the emotional and social weight of the already existing public and online queerphobia.

Offline Consequences of Online Queer Visibility

Many participants explained that online hate often spilled into real life. Digital hostility turned into real-world threats and public harassment. Content they posted online, such as images, videos, or subtle expressions of queerness, could be screenshot and shared. This could lead to offline bullying, confrontation, or damage their reputation.

Sangat described anxiety after a college photo of them wearing a pride flag cape was mocked in an anonymous online post. The digital attack created real-life tension because it came from someone within their physical campus environment.

"I have to sit next to people who have either seen that hate post or participated in it." (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Queer individuals feared that increasing queer visibility or legal gains, like marriage equality, might trigger coordinated backlash.

"If you see people holding hands or guys kissing, very conservative people, they would come and attack. Massive groups of conservative people will be formed just to hate and be anti-LBGTQ if new laws in support of LGBTQ people are passed. It's going to be very heated." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Anita saw her online visibility translate into neighborhood harassment. After her TikTok went viral, she became a target for sexual harassment by a local uncle.

"He tried to touch me inappropriately and made remarks like 'Do you want to join me?' I feel disgusted recalling it." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

At school, peers who saw Anita's TikTok relating to queer themes later avoided her entirely.

"Everyone was shocked. My friends started to distance themselves from me." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Kiran experienced an even more extreme form of fear. After connecting online with someone and agreeing to meet, they felt an intense panic of being a victim of a hate crime.

"What if this person murders me and throws me away?" (Kiran, 23, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Anshu, referencing the news of the viral beating of a trans woman in Kailali, felt the fear of being the next victim of trans hate.

"I felt like someone would come and beat me like that [like the trans woman being beaten in the news]. I felt so horrible and frightened." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

The offline threats often started from online exposure. Social media monitoring made these risks worse. Across these cases, the online-offline nexus magnified minority stress: distal stressors (online hate, ridicule, viral content) generated proximal stress (fear, hypervigilance, anxiety), constraining both social participation and self-expression.

Emotional Toll of Living with Queerphobia

Participants reported internalized queerphobia, identity crisis, and hypervigilance as a result of social invalidation and fear of being outed. These are typical proximal stressors in Minority Stress Theory since internalized stigma and

anticipatory anxiety develop out of recurrent exposure to distal stressors such as discrimination, bullying, and family or peer rejection. Trauma, anxiety, depression, and secondary stress due to the observation of the victimization of others were caused by chronic exposure to discrimination, bullying, and family or peer rejection.

Internalized Queerphobia

Across the interviews, internalized queerphobia and identity conflict were major emotional challenges for queer individuals in Nepal. Participants frequently described deep internal struggles caused by repeated social invalidation. All participants experienced, at some stage, moments of crisis about their queerness, including shame, suppression, identity denial, or attempts to change. Queerphobic messages, whether subtle or overt, shaped how they saw their bodies, desires, and self-worth.

> *If I were masculine, it would have been a lot better, a lot easier for me to deal with people. There wouldn't be anxiety. There wouldn't be mental impacts. It [queerphobia in school] made me question myself like 'Why can't I be masc? (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*
>
> *I used to feel when I grow old, I won't be enough and sort of be ashamed [for being gay]. (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*
>
> *Initially, there were many negative stereotypes. I internalized it and I had an apprehension about it. So, I purposely removed myself from this kind of interaction [about queerness]." (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

Gender non-conforming participants such as Sangat and Kiran revealed how internalized queerphobia was shaped by others' discomfort with their nonbinary or feminine expressions. Sangat narrated how friends treated them as if queerness were a *"contagious disease"*.

In many cases, participants did not initially reject their identities but instead rejected the language associated with them.

> *"Though I knew I liked men, I hated that word [gay] back then." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

The mental conflict arose when society and media portrayed queer identity in derogatory terms. Madhu, a trans man, shared that after his family found out about his relationship with a girl, they cast his love as a karmic curse.

> *My parents found out about my relationship. They told me that I was a girl and having a relationship with another girl in this life would curse me to be born as 'chhaka' in my next life too. (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)*

Similarly, Anshu, a trans woman, internalized rejection so deeply that she once asked if she could change herself. She was torn between knowing her identity and not being able to accept or show it in a hostile environment.

"I know myself and I know who I am, but I still cannot accept it and express myself the way I want to. No doctor can cure me; I am who I am." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

Other participants expressed concern that their loved ones would experience the same stigma or discrimination due to being queer, reflecting their own experiences and the internalized fears.

> *I do not wish my brother to become someone like me [queer], not because I hate myself but because I do not wish my brother to suffer like me. (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)*
>
> *I told her [my younger sister] that she might suffer like me if she feels like that [having same-sex attraction]. People will point fingers at me and her both. (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)*

The internalized queerphobia was more than self-hate. It came from seeing the social consequences of being queer and fearing the same for others.

Hypervigilance and Fear of Being Outed

Many participants felt constant anxiety from concealing their identity. Whether partially out or fully closeted, they lived in a state of continuous alertness.

"You have to be on high alert every day." (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Participants carefully filtered what they shared online and in person to avoid judgment. Even indirect exposure to queerphobic material increased fear and resulted into self-isolation.

"I really feel scared of being judged. I don't really post and embrace my sexuality online." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Joshan avoided fully disclosing his queerness to his father to maintain emotional safety.

"Once I told my father, 'What if I'm different?' and he said, 'Talk to me.' But I diverted the question." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Participants expressed concern that once they shared their identity, it might spread to others, including people they did not trust.

"I kind of regretted coming out to my brother after months. What if he said something to someone?" (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

"The person was one whom I trusted, someone who shared a lot with me, and then dragged me on social media for expressing my queerness." (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Fear of betrayal by friends, family, or neighbors made participants constantly alert, even around people they trust.

Trauma and Mental Health Struggles

Queerphobia affected participants all the time and added up over the years. It leads to constant stress, exhaustion, and mental health struggles, even in safer places.

"I can't find any coping mechanisms, I'm just anxious for that, I think." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Neel characterized the effect of exposure to online hate speech as: *"Triggering, fearful, unsureness, and agitating."*

Sangat, similarly, spoke of days when a single instance of hate would cause emotional shutdown.

> *The day that I hear any kind of hate speech, I get completely drained. You have no option but to sleep. It shows in your expression and your mood. Like when you video call your parents, you can't tell them the truth. (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out).*

Most of the participants had traumatic memories of rejection, abuse and violence, most of which were inflicted by the family or close circles. These incidents defined permanent terror, hopelessness or dissociation. Anshu, in particular, was confined, humiliated and sexually abused since she was very young, and the rejection by her parents made her trauma worse.

> *I was not allowed to step outside the house after 4 pm. I wasn't allowed to even speak. My father's torture ruined my studies. The sexual abuse I endured was dismissed by my parents. Now I don't want to study at all. I felt so depressed and cried so much. If someone had asked me who my friend was before, my answer would have been my pillow, where I sleep, because it is the one who gets to see all my tears. I still get panic attacks. If a man touches me, my hands start to tremble. (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)*

Madhu also described a downward spiral of mental health after being repeatedly invalidated and humiliated at school and at home.

> *I stopped doing everything. I battled depression. I didn't know what I was eating, where I was walking. I used to think that I would rather die. I sat down on the floor, grabbed my teacher by his leg, and started to beg him to kill me. 'Give me the injection and make me die without pain. (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)*

Madhu's breakdown resulted from years of stress from invalidation, gender dysphoria, and a lack of dignity, rather than a single incident.

Participants also described feeling fear and physical distress when witnessing queer people being harassed online. Experiencing violence as a spectacle on social media caused secondary trauma.

"My body was shaken and shivering after watching the video where the [lesbian] girls were beaten." (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)

Participants across all identities- gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and gender nonconforming- shared experiences of internal conflict, fear, trauma, and burnout. Their pain came not only from violence or slurs but from repeated invalidations, silenced joy, and constant emotional labor.

Comprehensively, the emotional burden outlined by participants is representative of the accruing consequences of minority stress. Online hate, public harassment and family or peer rejection falls under the distal stressors that interact with proximal stressors such as internalized queerphobia, hypervigilance and fear of being outed. The result of this combination is chronic anxiety, trauma and identity conflict, which explains how structural, social and interpersonal types of queerphobia intersect to erode mental health and well-being.

CHAPTER V
COPING STRATEGIES AND ACTS OF RESISTANCE

Overview

In this chapter, I explore my second research question on how LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal cope with or respond to online queerphobic hate speech, alongside their attitude towards institutional support. This segment contextualizes these coping strategies based on the Minority Stress Theory as queer people negotiate distal stressors (external discrimination) and proximal stressors (internalized queerphobia, hypervigilance) in the context of seeking ameliorative practices.

Protective Practices against Online Queerphobia

The participants used a combination of different tactics to protect themselves against online queerphobia. Identity management and selective disclosure enabled them to control who could know about their queerness and create hubs of safety online. Most of them had to resort to disconnection and emotional depersonalization, employing platform tools like blocking and reporting, and setting personal boundaries to preserve their mental health. Some selectively engaged with hate speech through humor, satire, or counter-speech to reclaim their story and confront aggression. The strategies are an attempt at minimizing exposure to distal stressors and proximal stress, which shows adaptive coping in a minority stress framework.

Selective Disclosure and Identity Management

Many participants shared their identity only in safe spaces. Selective disclosure is an ameliorating factor in MST, which assists in minimizing exposure to external stressors and preserving social connectedness when feasible. They were out to some people but hid it from others. This helped them feel more in control and less at risk. Joshan described being *"quarterly out,"* with only about a quarter of the people in his life knowing about his identity. He added that he would wait until financial independence comes out fully.

> *I'm closeted. I've just opened up about being gay to two of my family members, that's my cousin sister and cousin brother. My close straight friends know about me. I just want to be financially stable. After that, I'll come out. Maybe ten years after, maybe eight years after. (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

Neel also described coming out only to a small group of trusted friends. He also used a pseudo-account online to respond to hate speech, which gave him a way to resist while staying protected.

"I have this pseudo account I use [to counter hate speech]." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

These actions are illustrations of how digital space can be actively negotiated as a micro-level intervention against minority stress, to enable the participants to have agency in regulating their exposure to distal stressors.

Selective identity management was common online. Many participants created alternate and private accounts to control visibility. Sangat, for example, maintained a private spam account as a safe space where they could express freely. They had selectively filtered their followers, keeping only some trusted individuals in their extended network. This helped them feel secure and selective about their energy and interactions.

> *I've made another private, secured spam account where I don't need to be scared of posting. I can post whatever I want to the people I choose to follow. Let's say if I have 200 followers in my main account, I'll only keep the people whom I can blindly trust, maybe just 20 followers out of 200. I'm very picky about my energy and what I give to people. (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)*

Anita, Kiran, and (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out) also managed dual identities online to control their visibility.

> *Not exactly fake ID, but I have two separate IDs. One for relatives and one for sharing everything. (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)*

> *I have two IDs. I use Pride flags in my main account and post videos where I am open about my sexuality. My family knows I am gay, but they don't support me, so I have to hide from them through another account. (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)*

For queer individuals, identity management was not about hiding in shame but about safety, emotional balance, and control over their story. By shifting between public and private selves, queer individuals set boundaries that worked as both protection and resistance.

For those not out, camouflage became a key strategy. Rohit practiced code-switching, shifting between roles depending on the situation.

"If you are not out, then you go into damage control, you engage them in a way that does not put the suspicion on you. I present as an ally and with some, I have interacted as a member of the LGBTQ community." (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Disclosure was not always possible or safe, making it less a default expectation and more a privilege. Silence itself became a form of resistance, aligning with MST's recognition that protective practices can buffer proximal and distal stressors in hostile environments.

Disengagement and Emotional Detachment

A second strategy was intentional disengagement. The participants were shunning aggressive individuals and exhausting relationships in self-defense. Disengagement was a productive reaction to digital aggression, misidentification, and emotional burnout. This is an active coping process within the framework of MST to decrease exposure to distal stressors and counteract the effects of minority stress on mental health.

To most people, particularly those who were subjected to constant misgendering or disbelief, withdrawal came from burnout rather than apathy. Anita, for instance, stopped trying to justify her bisexual identity after repeated invalidation.

"A lot of people do not believe me when I say I am bisexual. I no longer explain it to them. I just passively agree with them." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Neel also described this exhaustion. At first, he tried responding to hate in comment sections, but over time, the effort left him drained.

"Now I don't even look at those comments [of hate], I just let it be." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

The journey from pain to selective disengagement was shared among many participants.

> *Back then, it was very difficult [to cope with online hate speech]. I think till I was 22 years old, it was extremely difficult. But now, I don't care much about it. I think of my comfort and my mental health. I don't overthink because nothing's gonna change because of me overthinking. (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

I think I have become indifferent to it [online queerphobia]. I preserve my own peace. There are so many things happening. I don't need to take another thing on my plate and be triggered about it. (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

I don't like to waste my energy there [engaging with haters]. I want to protect my energy and peace. Instead of wasting my energy on that, I could use it somewhere else, in a more productive space. (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Rohit shared having moved from emotional reactions to deliberate detachment. By refusing to engage with hate, he placed the burden of ignorance on the bigots rather than on himself.

It's not me who should be getting riled up. I let them be ignorant. At some point, you start to realize, 'Why am I paying so much attention to this [hate speech]?' With time, you learn to turn it off. I cannot change people's minds, but what I can change is how I feel about it. I'll change how I feel about them. (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Over time, many participants relied on emotional detachment to protect their mental health. From an MST perspective, this reflects strategic boundary-setting to alleviate chronic proximal stress and avoid secondary stress. Participants often chose to manage their emotional responses rather than react to every instance of ignorance.

To how many people can we educate and confront? I have no energy to confront all the people that I meet. We can't go on correcting everybody now, can we? (Ashwin, 20, trans man, publicly out)

I think it is not necessary to educate everyone. It's easier to wake up a person who is sleeping, but it is not possible to wake up a person who is pretending to be sleeping. (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)

Participants often used platform features like blocking, muting, and unfollowing as emotional defense.

If they keep on going continuously [with hatred], I get agitated and want to shout at them. So before reaching that point, I just block them and make it stop. (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)

I blocked my family members because they keep telling me this and that regarding my sexuality. (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Yes, when I realize that the conversation is becoming negative, I block them. (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

(Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out) described emotionally distancing herself from her parents, as she cannot confide in them. Even at home, she leaves the room when her mother uses slurs like *"chhaka."*

"My mother calls me 'chhaka'. I leave the room whenever this happens. I have been emotionally detached from my parents for a very long time now. I cannot confide my pain, my happiness, or my sadness with my parents."

These emotional boundaries did not equal healing. Some participants used meditation and introspection to cope with the emotional impact of hate speech. This practice helped them regain balance, build self-confidence, and focus on their own well-being rather than others' opinions.

"I engaged in meditation and gradually went back to being who I was before [the extremes of hate speech]. My biggest learning was that I shouldn't care about what others think about me and just have strong faith in myself." (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)

Choosing not to educate every ignorant person, not to reply to every hate comment, not to justify one's identity again and again, were ways of refusing to be emotionally exploited. Participants demonstrated that in a culture where queer people are constantly expected to perform resilience publicly, withdrawing emotionally was in itself an act of self-protection and resistance.

These illustrations indicate that emotional detachment is an ameliorative mechanism in MST, which alleviates proximal stress, shields self-esteem, and builds a sense of agency of oneself in hostile settings.

Counter-Engagement

While some participants chose disengagement, others responded to queerphobia selectively and assertively. Their ways of reacting ranged from humor and satire to intellectual or communal strategies. From an MST perspective, these strategies function as proactive coping mechanisms that directly confront distal stressors while maintaining control over proximal stress.

Rohit, though selectively closeted, used irony as a powerful tool. When faced with mocking questions or slurs, he used flamboyant exaggeration to unsettle his aggressors.

> *If someone asks me if I have a boyfriend, I just say 'yes, daddy.' I just play along. So, once when someone used a slur at me, I told him, 'Okay, daddy, I would be your gay boyfriend.' I made him so uncomfortable that he does not even approach that topic with me now. (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

Rohit's engagement used the oppressor's language strategically to diminish its power. It was not intended to achieve acceptance but to regain power over the narrative.

Joshan applied historical analogies to defy the hate without confronting. He tied queerphobia to historical injustices in order to emphasize its illogicality and irrelevance.

> *I tell them that black people were discriminated against, and there was a caste system before. So, this [queer issues] is just like that. Discriminating against LGBTQ people comes from the same kind of thinking as slavery, casteism, or the witch-hunt. After 50 or 100 years, your children are going to be normal with LGBTQ. (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)*

Some participants used careful and thoughtful assertiveness, choosing when and how to correct others. This allowed them to stand up for themselves without creating conflict.

> *One time, I countered him [the shopkeeper], 'The girl in your house might like to cook and clean, and I like to travel and dance, so what? (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)*
>
> *Parents would come to me and use 'Ma'am' to address me. Later, I asked them not to address me as such, and they understood. (Madhu, 19, trans man, publicly out)*

Assertive engagement was often collective. Sangat remembered a viral social media post in the middle of Pride Month that created an online confrontation. As a reaction, they organized friends and queer networks to facilitate the counter-speech.

Neel, on his part, selectively joined comment threads when no one was there to defend the queer community especially on Nepali news pages.

"In western posts, there are already a fraction of people defending the queer community, but there is none in Nepal, so I do feel the need to do it." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Neel's selective engagement stemmed from a sense of moral responsibility to challenge silence. Similarly, Ashwin, a publicly out trans man, described educating people who asked intrusive questions but set firm boundaries when faced with hostility.

"I try to make them understand by explaining that we [trans people] are just like you. But if a person confronts us in a mean way, I don't entertain them." (Ashwin, 20, trans man, publicly out)

For participants, standing up online helped protect dignity, reclaim their narrative, and educate others. Using humor, explanations, group support, and direct replies, they challenged queerphobia in meaningful ways. Counter-engagement is therefore an MST-informed adaptive approach in which minority stress is challenged in a systematic way to enable participants to assert identity, develop resilience, and establish protective social networks.

Institutional Response and Support Mechanisms

Participants reported a system-wide problem of barriers to justice, insinuating police and legal institutions as generally unresponsive, heteronormative, and unsafe for LGBTQIA+ issues both online and offline. These institutions, traditionally viewed as potential ameliorative factors, tended to be dysfunctional as seen through an MST lens, which did not serve to buffer distal or proximal stress but in fact, amplified minority stress. Protection was also limited by complex legal processes, cultural discrimination and incompetent platform policing. However, the queer community, its online and offline networks, turned out to be lifelines and they offered emotional guidance and defense. The spaces provided the participants with a chance to affirm themselves, a sense of belonging, and resilience to handle institutional gaps. Social engagement, which was achieved either with NGOs, social media or informal networks, proved to be a significant empowerment and ameliorative factors.

Barriers to Reporting and Justice

Participants across identities revealed systemic apathy, dismissal, and deeply entrenched heteronormative structures that made reporting or seeking justice unsafe in Nepal. Rohit brought up the example of his queer friend, who was being blackmailed

online by his partner, and wanted the police to assist them. Instead of investigating, officials brushed it aside as irrelevant.

"They [police] did not get any kind of response. They were like, 'We do not deal with this kind of thing [related to same-sex issues].' We [queer people] are not seen as victims; they think we deserve it." (Rohit, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

This depicts a maladaptive ameliorative process: the police as a system which was supposed to buffer stress increased the stress among minority by invalidating victimization.

Anita also approached the Cyber Bureau after experiencing online harassment. Despite providing concrete proof of abuse, she found herself interrogated for retaliating.

"I showed them [police] the screenshots of the hate messages. The officer there was blaming me for responding to the messages." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Anshu was sexually abused as a teenager, yet her trauma was ignored by both legal institutions and her family.

"I told my parents everything, yet they told me, 'Let it be.' These things should be hidden. In our country, where girls are not given justice for things like these, we [trans women] are not even a priority." (Anshu, 19, trans woman, semi-publicly out)

Given this repeated failure of redress systems, participants frequently chose not to report harm. The police were not seen as protectors; rather, they were often feared and actively avoided. When asked about reporting harassment to the police, participants were clear and dismissive.

"Police? No." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

"Authorities will first not know about the LGBTQ+ community itself, and they may not agree to believe that a male can have a relationship with another male." (Kiran, 23, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Some participants also admitted their own unfamiliarity with legal processes.

"I do not know [the reporting process]. A lot of us do not know much about the reporting mechanism." (Kiran, 23, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Even in the case of having legal frameworks, because of their complexity, inaccessibility and heteronormativeness, they are mostly rendered useless to queer

people. Those who attempted to utilize avenues such as the Cyber Bureau or the police stations usually experienced emotionally insecure spaces, a factor that escalated the chances of exposure and stigma.

"There is one person at the desk handling complaints near the entry door. What if the victim is not comfortable sharing in such an open space? There must be a secluded space to confide." (Ashwin, 20, trans man, publicly out)

"The person [at the police station] asked me to confide in front of all police officers and strangers present in the room. It was so discomforting." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Participants noted that legal protection often depends on power and politics.

"Until and unless there is a back-up force from the media and powerful people, it is difficult to get services as a queer person." (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

"Only if queer issues get mass social media attention, only then will people come to support." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Participants noted that online platforms can also be unsafe in Nepal due to a lack of regulation, weak moderation, culturally insensitive algorithms, and poor state-level cyber protection. Reporting queerphobic content on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok often had no effect, especially for Nepali-language or culturally specific hate. Participants noted that the automated systems often failed to recognize local slang and coded language used to target queer people.

"It [social media] doesn't really take the issue [queerphobia] seriously and prompts that 'the community guidelines are not violated.'" (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Overall, participants perceived that legal and online systems in Nepal were often hard to access, unhelpful, and poorly equipped to protect queer people, leaving them open to harassment, abuse, and neglect. The systems, in MST context, were generally dysfunctional ameliorative factors leaving the participants susceptible to distal and proximal stressors.

Community-based Support

Both online and offline queer community spaces were essential lifelines to queer people. They provided support, companionship, healing and a feeling of belonging. These networks, based on MST perspective, acted as important ameliorative variables that helped in buffering both distal and proximal stressors in

the absence of protective formal institutions and family systems. This was unlike the heteronormative spaces which usually required silence or a pretense.

(Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out), who was a lesbian woman rejected by the immediate family, had to seek solace in her cousin sister in a foreign country, who became her lifeline. Anshu, a trans woman who ran out of the house, found a queer-rights group to shelter and protect her in times of needs. (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out) also credited queer networks for saving her life.

"These queer-based organizations and communities are the only places I have. I have found strength through these spaces." (Shweta, 19, lesbian cisgender woman, publicly out)

Digital community-building was a significant source of emotional support along with physical ones. Social media brought the participants in touch with their peers and enhanced their sense of identity. Applications like Clubhouse played a key role during the COVID-19 lockdown for queer individuals to find a shared community.

"During the COVID-19 lockdown, we [queer young people] created groups, talked 24/7 through Clubhouse, met in person, and the bond is still strong." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

"I not only got to learn about the concepts of queer people, but also I found spaces for networking, especially getting to know that I'm not the only one." (Neel, 23, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

For Anita, TikTok became the way to find queer friends and understand her identity.

"After I came out, all the friends that I found were through TikTok." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Anita's identity journey included cutting her hair short and later going bald, which created tension at home. Instead of pulling back, she used online spaces to learn and feel supported. She often talked with a queer friend online and asked questions to make sense of herself. Through these connections and her own searching, Anita came to see herself as a masculine-presenting bisexual woman.

"They [online queer friend] used to share with me about their identity, and I used to ask them if cutting hair would make me a boy. So, I searched it on Google." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Queer communities not only offered emotional support but also acted as defense systems during online harassment. Sangat described creating an informal *"digital backup squad"* during a major online conflict. Even outside of crises, Sangat often turned to their queer group chat for validation.

"I shared the issue [of queerphobic incident] in the larger queer network in a group chat. Everyone told me how problematic it was." (Sangat, 20, queer/gender-nonconforming AMAB, semi-publicly out)

Formal queer spaces, such as NGOs, played an important role for many participants. These spaces offered emotional support, education, healing, and even training in resistance. Kiran described attending a "Guardians and Children Meet Up" organized by a queer rights organization, where facilitators introduced queer concepts to family members and helped bridge understanding.

Even those who had not directly used community support drew strength from simply knowing such spaces existed.

"I have the courage to go to queer rights NGOs [in case of extreme queerphobia]. I feel very empowered now, a lot more than I was before." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Resistance was not always about confrontation. For some, it appeared in the form of joy, celebration, and community gatherings. Anita, despite daily microaggressions, spoke warmly about attending a Pride Parade.

"We danced so much and enjoyed ourselves during the Pride celebration." (Anita, 19, bisexual cisgender woman, semi-publicly out)

Joshan, too, described feeling *"uplifted"* when hearing affirming things from his gay friends.

"When I see or hear things [of success] from my gay friends, that really makes me feel uplifted." (Joshan, 24, gay cisgender man, semi-publicly out)

Community was not only a refuge but also a space where queer people affirmed who they are. Queer networks provided safety, solidarity, and empowerment in the face of online hate, family rejection, and institutional erasure. These community-based networks acted as functioning ameliorative factors in MST terms. Queer networks were necessary intermediaries, providing both protective and restorative roles, in the absence of responsive formal institutions.

CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION

Overview of the Chapter

The findings indicate that queer individuals in Nepal face prejudice, discrimination, and violence both online and offline. The said experiences can be ascribed to the Minority Stress Theory (MST), which highlights that sexual and gender minorities are particularly affected in disproportionate terms by social stress due to stigmatization, which has detrimental effects on their mental health (Meyer, 2003).

MST characterizes two types of stressors: 1) the distal stressors that are external, objective stressors like prejudice, discrimination, and violence; and 2) the proximal stressors that are the internal, subjective processes, including anticipation of rejection, the need to be highly vigilant to protect themselves, the concealment of their LGBTQIA+ identity, and internalized stigma such as internalized homophobia and transphobia (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003).

The findings highlight both distal and proximal stressors, as well as the essential role that the coping mechanisms and supportive systems play in alleviating their effects, which aligns with the ameliorative components of the Minority Stress Theory (MST). Nevertheless, they also demonstrate that digital life generates context-dependent stressors and feedback loops, which cannot be readily modeled through a simple application of the MST.

I have placed my findings in the wider theoretical and empirical discourse in this chapter by examining how they intersect and extend the paradigm of MST.

The Architecture of Minority Stress

The experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in the Kathmandu Valley demonstrated that stress is constructed through a dynamic intersection of digital hostility, entrenched social stigma, and institutional neglect. The findings indicate two particular architectural characteristics of this stress environment: the normalization of hate through slurs and humor, and the instantaneous online to offline translation of surveillance.

Forms of Online Queerphobia and the Pathways of Minority Stress

The presence of traditional distal stressors that are in line with the global trends dominated the Nepali digital space. These included overt hate speech, like slurs, threats, and forced outing (Hubbard, 2020), which appeared commonly in the comment sections of posts on LGBTQIA+ rights. These remarks directly positioned queer individuals as criminals, immoral, or being part of a "Western culture" influence. These actions are evident overt forms of discrimination.

Conversely, the architecture gives prominence to the variables of humor and memes as a very powerful and context-specific type of distal stress in Nepal. Queerphobic jokes and memes, including the crude puns "G-Pay" and "Gand-Pay," as well as jokes that mock feminine boys and trans women, were widely shared and commonly accepted online. This hostility is especially devious as the aggression was often carried out by young, well-educated and technologically advanced users and was dismissed by them as being "just a joke."

This process of normalization makes queer individuals devote their emotional resources to the discussion of the legitimacy of their victimization, instead of addressing the perpetrators in the first place. This formulates a double-bind stressor: the external attack (distal stressor) is trivialized, which increases the internalized burden on the victim and contributes to proximal stressors such as self-doubt and hypervigilance. The findings show that this ridicule is just as harmful as direct insults, but the fact that the society approves of the hate "in the name of fun" reinforces the pre-existing stigma.

On social media, openly queer people were regularly targeted in direct and personal attacks with queerphobic comments directly below their posts. According to one of the participants, every positive comment was followed by five negative comments. They were called derogatory names like "chhakka," "napungsak," and "kinnar," and termed as extremists or practitioners of a "new religion." These explicit types of online aggression are the manifestations of distal stressors in MST. The visibility that allows one to express oneself, however also, opens the door to be more vulnerable to hate, which requires openly queer users to invariably negotiate hostility as the price of being authentic.

Conversely, those who were not openly queer encountered a subtler but equally destructive form of stress. They were not attacked directly but experienced vicarious and repeated traumas of seeing others being mocked and attacked in viral

posts and videos. This secondhand exposure triggered physical discomfort and emotional distress, solidifying a feeling of anticipatory fear.

Participants reported feeling anxious, physically tense, and fearful just by being constantly subjected to viral content of queer people being mocked and assaulted. Within the framework of MST, it indicates how distal stressors can be internalized indirectly to produce anticipatory vigilance even in viewers who are not targets. It is the reproduction and routine of these contents that convert collective spaces of humor into emotional contagion circuits, through which trauma spreads through the community. This kind of bystander trauma also reinforces the cycle of minority stress: by observing the harm done to others, one becomes certain of their own social vulnerability, which maintains an atmosphere of constant vigilance and distrust in online space. Participants also perceived that this atmosphere caused internalized transphobia and homophobia, which is one of the major proximal stressors.

These opposing experiences together demonstrate a paradox of digital visibility within the Nepali queer context: to be visible is to be targeted, to be invisible is to internalize fear. Both the tracks perpetuate the cycle of minority stress, explaining how the online world recreates the structural inequalities through various affective channels, one being visible and external, and the other internal and embodied.

The Role of Anonymity and Familiarity in Shaping Minority Stress

The findings uncover an important distinction between anonymous and familiar perpetrators of queerphobic hate. With the help of digital anonymity, unidentified users (those who were usually men and had pseudonymous accounts) could use invisibility and impunity to commit acts of aggression without repercussions. It is a form of remote aggression that shows that power relations are gender-based and individuals are more affected due to digital disinhibition.

Conversely, hate committed by familiar acquaintances, classmates or even fellow members of the queer community led to a more pernicious damage.
The deception of trust shattered the wall between safe and unsafe spaces and transformed intimate social networks into the undependable environment of surveillance and criticism. The anonymity permitted unrestrained cruelty and the familiarity enhanced emotional betrayal. Through this, online queerphobia sparked both structural and interpersonal sources of stress.

The internalization of external aggression as a result of the cycle of minority stress enhances the cumulative impact of anonymous and familiar hate. The narratives of the participants showed that the continuous impact of queerphobic stereotypes and derogatory comments slowly undermined the sense of self-worth, creating internal tensions, feelings of shame, suppression, identity denial, and efforts to change their gender expression. Participants gave accounts of how queerphobic hate speech affected the way they perceived their bodies, desires and self-esteem. This internalization demonstrates how the digital space not only externalizes violence but also replicates it psychologically making social media a place where structural oppression can be embodied as self-doubt and hopelessness. Minority stress causes severe distress and suicidal thoughts (Meyer, 2003). As witnessed in tragic events such as the one with Madhu, the constant nullification of self-identity can lead the minority stress continuum to a state of utter distress and suicidal thoughts.

Collectively, these trends indicate that the online queerphobic hate in Nepal serves as a public uproar of hatred and a personal cause of suffering, wherein visibility, anonymity, and personal connection, come together to form a persistent emotional harm loop.

The Online-Offline Minority Stress Continuum

One of the central architectural elements was the rapid, threatening transfer of digital expression to physical, real-life effects, thus transforming digital spaces, which can be a source of pride and community, into surveillance and violence vectors.

The online ecosystem provided a requisite platform on which queer people could express their identity, including sharing about LGBTQIA+ rights and using identifying queer icons like rainbow flags and hashtags. Nevertheless, this online validation frequently came clashing with what transpired into real life repercussions of queerphobia, revealing the thin line between online presence and tangible vulnerability. Sangat explained that they were scared of being compelled to sit beside individuals who had participated in the online hate post against them or had viewed them. This kind of online-offline nexus entrenches the applicability of previous studies that suggest LGBTQIA+ people are more vulnerable to hate crimes and harassment along intersections of social environments (Amos et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2015). This anticipatory fear is a proximal stressor in the MST, which shows the extent to which the effects of online hate are extended to offline settings. The anonymity of the offenders on the internet and the familiarity of the offenders in the

real world expands the stress because the threat is no longer abstract but relational and immediate.

The findings also show that digital visibility is directly converted to real-world distal stressors, such as community exclusion, confrontation, and physical violence. Indicatively, when Anita engaged with queer content on viral TikTok posts, this directly resulted in her becoming the victim of sexual harassment in her neighborhood and, in turn, made classmates at school avoid her. Other participants were full of anxiety and fear that they would become the target of a hate crime after associating with a person online and after hearing the news about violence against trans people. This is not an isolated finding, as the literature indicates hate speech to be a common cause of offline violence and discrimination (Arcila Calderón et al., 2024; Stefanita & Buf, 2021).

This architecture is contradictory in nature: visibility is not only a necessary performance of confirmation and statement, but also an immediate trigger of threat and real violence in the physical world. The findings demonstrate that the internet is viewed as a ubiquitous system of surveillance by many, especially queer youths of rural origins now residing in Kathmandu, where gender non-conformity is monitored and reported back home.

To practice digital self-expression is to be vulnerable to the ubiquitous nexus of surveillance in which strangers and familiar acquaintances (peers, family members) can view, save, and share posts. Having a fear of being outed or betrayed by friends or relatives that might screenshot the posts and hand them over to family members is a notable sign of hypervigilance, a central proximal stressor in MST. The participants indicated that they were very critical about what they shared online to remain unnoticed.

The digital world is therefore driven by a mechanism that systematically strengthens the necessity of self-monitoring, in which the subject should invest in emotional resources for consistent monitoring of the threat of being identified or betrayed by their closest contacts. This fear does not allow the online space to live up to its promise as an unburdened place of safety and community.

The Failure of Protective Systems

In a healthy system, legal bodies, families, and schools are the institutional structures that play an ameliorative role in buffering the impact of distal stress. Nonetheless, the findings indicate that in Nepal, the so-called protective systems are

highly institutionalized with queerphobia that essentially breaks the buffer and turns institutional pathways into the secondary sources of distal stress.

Legal Systems as Distal Stressors

The legal frameworks that exist to provide remedy in Nepal never helped and only worsened the trauma of the victims. The breakdown of the legal system is marked by a deep conflict between the progressive constitutional rights and the aggression of the institutional practice. Nepal has been known to have made historic achievements in recognizing the LGBTQIA+ rights, such as constitutional prohibitions on LGBTQIA+ discrimination (UN Women 2023). But this ideal of law is ruined by an operative reality of systemic apathy and institutional disjuncture.

Official reporting systems were significant barriers to justice among the participants. The failure on an institutional level was extensive because police were inclined to ignore queer issues, such as queer sexual abuse, and choose not to investigate them. It is augmented further by the fact that Nepal lacks any law specifically related to hate crime (Sow et al., 2022). Such dismissal transforms the police force from a protective agent into secondary distal stressor which further exacerbates queer trauma.

This system does not just fail to defend, but it goes further to blame the victim. Anita was one of the participants who had been questioned by an officer over having conversations with her abusers after submitting screenshots of the abuse. Legal systems are often useless since they are inaccessible, complex, and prejudiced against queer people. The weaknesses in legal assistance are further compounded by the fact that victims have no privacy within the police stations to report complaints, which further creates discomfort and subjects them to danger.

Participants also highlighted the fact that the legal protections, though officially present, are not accessible to the majority of the LGBTQIA+ people. To obtain justice, a substantial social, economic, or political capital, including media coverage, organizational backing, and mass protests, might be necessary, which is beyond the financial means of many community members. This structural inaccessibility changes formal rights into hollow promises for most queer people, giving them very few options to remain quiet, self-censor, or not seek justice at all.

In Minority Stress terms, this institutional failure is a distal stressor: the perceived safety is theoretically available but practically unachievable and strengthens a sense of helplessness and perceived internal vulnerability. The difference between

the privileged few, who can use these mechanisms, and the rest of the community shows how inequalities in structure perpetuate chronic stress both in digital and offline worlds.

Unsupportive Schools and Families

Schools and homes, which could have been the first line of protecting and supportive spaces, became the sources of continuous stress for many queer individuals in Nepal. Institutional agents, instead of being ameliorative factors, tend to strengthen distal stressors. Schools and colleges were often the location of open gendered discipline with teachers and administrators dismissing queer identities, comparing gender non-conformity to physical contamination, and terming queer students as "abnormal." These institutional invalidations are specific distal stressors, which have a disproportionate impact on transgender and nonbinary students, as they are targeted by scrutiny and exclusion, as well as identity policing (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Institutionalization of stigma increases peer-based bullying, demonstrating that structural forces can exaggerate the levels of stress among minorities.

The trend is also acute at home. Numerous participants experienced rejection from their parents or relatives, with some being verbally abused and slurred, others receiving physical punishment and being left out of family events. This absence of family support exacerbates proximal stressors among queer youth, such as identity concealment, hypervigilance, and internalized queerphobia.

In contrast to the non-queer peers, who generally find an affirmation and protection among these primary social institutions, queer youth are always negotiating between self-expression and relationship survival. The fear of losing ties to family or of punishment in the institution triggers a cycle of closeting, self-doubt, and the increased vulnerability to mental health. Schools and families, typically ameliorative sources of coping and resilience in MST terms, are refractory channels through which distal and proximal stress is reproduced, and the intersection of structural and relational factors in determining chronic stress in the lives of queer youths.

Ineffective Digital Governance

Digital spaces did not help reduce minority stress among Nepali queer youths but instead often worsened it because of systemic disparities in governance and cultural competency. The Terms of Service (TOS) of the leading Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and online platforms, including Facebook, X, and YouTube, specifically forbid hate speech and have the right to remove the content or block an

account in case of violations (Cohen-Almagor, 2011; Warner & Hirschberg, 2012). Likewise, the EU Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online (2016) requires tech firms to review and delete content labeled by flaggers in a period of 24 hours (Williams & Mishcon de Reya, n.d.). Nonetheless, such international regulatory frameworks, which have been developed mainly in Euro-American language and cultural settings, cannot accommodate the variations of hate expression in multi-lingual and socio-culturally diverse settings like that of Nepal.

Participants disclosed that Nepali-specific slang, coded language, and culturally nuanced queerphobic memes were often not identified by automated moderation systems and reporting mechanisms. As a result, the entire responsibility of flagging and reporting hate was put on the victims, who in most cases found themselves being brushed off with the response that their report was "not violating community standards." Not only did this failure contribute to continued exposure to digital violence, but it also changed the very process of reporting into a site of re-traumatization and helplessness.

Such ineffectiveness of these platforms turns what would otherwise be ameliorative institutional support into a distal stressor. The failure in reporting hate speech, delay, and poor response mean queer individuals are left to protect and monitor themselves, which increases proximal stressors when under MST.

Compared to non-queer users, who feel comparatively safe and assured in their interactions over the internet, queer participants found themselves navigating a digital space, in which structural inattention and algorithmic blindness recreated exclusion, isolation, and long-term psychological distress. In this respect, the digital space, instead of alleviating the stress of minorities, is another place where institutional failures enhanced vulnerability and internalized distress.

The Ecology of Queer Resilience

To tackle the prevalent queerphobia, the LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nepal resorted to various coping strategies and resistance, which do not only demonstrate their personal resilience but also the strength of collective action. These are ameliorative factors which cushion the negative impact of minority stress.

Queer Agency and the Disruption of Stress Cycles

The resilience behaviors embraced by the LGBTQIA+ youth are not merely coping; they are complex mechanisms that essentially disrupt the traditional MST stress pathway by transforming the vulnerable distal exposure into the empowered

proximal affirmation. Resilience is not an incidental act but a strategic utilization of resources that contests the power dynamics that is conducted in the stress model.

Among the major strategies applied by the queer individuals was selective disclosure and identity management whereby individuals only disclosed their identities in safe locations and to only those individuals they considered safe. This included possessing two online personalities, or pseudo-accounts in social media, and setting a cautious filter on whom they followed in order to control their exposure and reduce risk.

The other way was to detach and disengage emotionally. The participants tended to avoid unpleasant individuals and exhausting experiences to save their mental well-being. This included not wanting to defend their identity every time, taking advantage of the platform tools like blocking and muting and even establishing an emotional distance between themselves and family members who were perpetuating queerphobia.

Though coping strategies, like withdrawal, may disrupt identity-building (Keighley, 2022), the participants framed it as self-preservation skills that overcame the pressures on queer individuals to defend their existence at all times. This proximal boundary-setting enables people to not be drained by the ongoing microaggressions, thereby saving the emotional capacity to subsequently take action significant in a broader response and solidarity (distal acts).

Many participants also engaged in selective counter-engagement as they strongly responded to queerphobia in order to disrupt the stress pathway on a fundamental level. These included humor and irony to destabilize aggressors, establishing historical parallels to expose discrimination, and teaching other people about queer identities. Such proactive engagement aligns with the concept of counter-speech being a preferable alternative to legal recourse, which would guarantee a freedom of speech while being proactive in combating hateful attitudes (Howard, 2019; Williams & Mishcon de Reya, n.d.). These are acts of reclaiming the weapons of oppression by depriving the oppressor of the ability to cause the intended harm. Making a projected shame an act of wit or instruction, they converted the distal stressor into a statement of proximal agency.

Community Solidarity as a Counter-Architecture of Minority Stress

Community spaces, online (like Clubhouse rooms, group chats) and offline (like NGOs, Pride Parades) were important ameliorative factors to mitigate the

psychological burden of minority stress. For the participants, these spaces were the initial place of refuge and acknowledgement, and provided them with friendship, validation, and healing which helped them overcome the isolation of family and the institutional rejection. Within the framework of MST, these spaces can be viewed as protective social structures which interrupt the distal-to-proximal stressor cycle by promoting collective affirmation and feeling of belonging.

Community solidarity serves as a strong tool of restorative emotion and identity recovery. As participants such as Sangat shared experiences of online hate against them in queer group chats and were directly validated by their peers, the shame and self-doubt imposed by the external hate was neutralized immediately by external, affirmed feedback. This is an externalization of affirmation, which turns potentially internalized shame into social indignation and solidarity.

These performances of collective empathy can re-position the emotional load of hate on the separate individual to the joint, and demonstrate how community confirmation, in the MST paradigm, is a form of socially shared coping.

Likewise, offline activities like Pride Parades and community get-togethers turned the state of visibility, a state previously implied to vulnerability and distal stress, into a source of happiness, empowerment, and protest. These displays of pride reversed the relationships of shame by returning the implication of visibility to political and emotional capital. By doing so, they re-established what Meyer (2003) describes as the social context of stress to a social context of resistance, and they showed how collective action can be both symbolic and practical in its provision of protection. The mere knowledge of such networks and events existing was also a psychological protection even to those who were unable to join in, to reassure them that there are structures of belonging and advocacy for queer youths like them.

Overall, queer community spaces in Nepal serve as a counter-architecture of minority stress, in which solidarity in itself is a form of resistance and mutual affirmation reclaims what systemic exclusion refuses. These networks, online and offline, transform resilience into a communal process by transforming collective experiences of discrimination into solidarity and affirmation.

CHAPTER VII
SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATION

Overview of the Chapter

In this chapter, I have summarized and concluded the overall findings of the research while drawing implications for further studies.

Summary

This research, *"Between Digital Hate and Queer Pride: A Thematic Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Experiences and Perceptions of Online Hate Speech in Nepal*," was conducted to explore the forms, effects, and coping strategies behind online queerphobic hate speech amongst the LGBTQIA+ youth between 18-24 years old in Kathmandu Valley. According to an interpretivist approach, the research presented a profound understanding of how digital spaces in Nepal have become significant sites of exposure and susceptibility to queer individuals.

The findings indicate that online queerphobic hate speech in Nepal is widespread and normalized. It manifests itself through slurs, dehumanizing comments, and derision in the form of humor. Both direct and vicarious attacks were experienced by participants, giving rise to distal stressors. These attacks caused proximal stress like anticipatory fear, hypervigilance and internalized queerphobia. Hostility spread to offline life as well, and resulted in harassment, social isolation, family alienation, and ostracism by the community.

These stressors were coped with using strategic strategies: selective disclosure, digital boundary setting, emotional detachment, and assertive counter-engagement, demonstrating Minority Stress Theory's ameliorative factors in action. Participants were not always safeguarded by the institutional systems. They would even aggravate the situation by disregarding complaints, accusing victims, and showing ineffective digital governance. Conversely, LGBTQIA+ networks, NGOs, and online communities provided such support through affirmation and a feeling of belonging. Such spaces also offered a sense of solidarity, and the participants were able to leverage vulnerability into resilience and empowerment.

Conclusion

The study concludes that although the Constitution of Nepal of 2015 and its policies make the country lawfully progressive concerning LGBTQIA+ rights, there is

still a wide gap between the ideals and the reality faced by the LGBTQIA+ community. The LGBTQIA+ individuals encounter systemic indifference, disregard, and victim-blaming by their parents, teachers, peers, internet users, and the police. The crossover of online-offline queerphobia and its impacts heightens the vulnerability of digitally active queer youths. Moreover, social media does not efficiently control context-related queerphobic hate speech, which leads to exhaustion of the victims.

Addressing online queerphobic hate speech in Nepal, therefore, demands a comprehensive, multi-layered approach that includes legal protections, culturally competent moderation of online content, and accessible mental health and community-based support systems. The findings support the dire necessity of bridging the gap between legal documents and social acceptance and making sure that every LGBTQIA+ person can experience their life with safety, dignity, and equality, in accordance with Nepal's Constitution and the principle of the global Sustainable Development Goal principle of *"leaving no one behind."*

Implications

The findings of this research have several important implications for policy, practice, and knowledge of queer experiences in Nepal.

Necessity of Legal and Institutional Reform

The extensive training and sensitization of law enforcement agents, legal actors, and police officials towards the LGBTQIA+ people and their concerns is critically needed. This involves the creation of accessible, confidential, and safe reporting systems that are concerned about their safety and victimization and are not about public-shaming and victim-blaming. The legal systems should be reviewed to legally recognize queer people as victims of harassment and abuse.

Improved Social Media Surveillance and Control

Social media corporations should more vigorously improve their moderation algorithms to identify and delete context-based queerphobic hate speech, Nepali slang, and coded language in memes and jokes, which have so far evaded automated systems. They should enhance transparency and feedback systems to fight victim fatigue and disempowerment on unsuccessful reports. The cooperation with local LGBTQIA+ organizations might assist in the development of efficient reporting and response guidelines.

Reform of Educational Environment

Schools and colleges should be addressed as potential sites of queerphobia. The policies in the institutions must clearly outlaw gendered stereotyping and discriminatory acts by the teachers and administrators. This will help in combating the normalization of queerphobic humor and bullying among peers. Targeted educational initiatives are vital in schools and colleges to mitigate gendered discipline and queerphobia among peers.

Enhanced Mental Health Care

Direct mental health services are required due to the high prevalence rates of trauma, depression, and internalized queerphobia which are disproportionately high among the youths between the ages of 18-24 years as they are overly vulnerable to online hate. These services should be culturally sensitive and trauma-informed to overcome the experiences of gender dysphoria, enforced concealment, and family rejection.

Empowerment of Community-based Organizations

There is a need for sustained funding towards community-based NGOs as they are regarded as key first responders, mental health providers, and centers of collective resistance to minority stress. The reinforcement of community efforts that support visibility and self-affirmation will help to overcome the impact of online hate and shame.

Ethical Media Practices

Media houses have a role to play in how they approach queer issues with responsibility and sensitivity, without taking advantage of queer lives to serve as clickbait content with intrusive interviews. Positive representation can be promoted, which will help to combat the negative stereotypes while making the public discourse more inclusive.

Implications for Future Research

Further studies are needed to understand how queer experiences vary in the various contexts of Nepal. Juxtaposing the rural and urban areas can allow identifying the way geography, culture, and technology availability influence the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people. Specific research on the unique vulnerabilities of intersex and asexual people is also widely necessary since their experiences are understudied. Longitudinal research can also contribute to the knowledge of long-term mental health consequences of digital queerphobia and how chronic exposure of hate on the

internet influences well-being. Lastly, the research studies in the future ought to examine the effects of coping strategies like selective disclosure, emotional detachment, and community solidarity on individuals over time and whether they remain effective or develop into alternative forms of resilience. These inquiries would enhance the knowledge on minority stress in Nepal and shape the attempts to build safer and more inclusive queer spaces.

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APPENDIX

Consent Form

Between Digital Hate and Queer Pride:
A Thematic Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Experiences and Perceptions of Online Hate Speech in Nepal

This research is conducted for the fulfillment of the degree of Master in Sustainable Development at Kathmandu University School of Education, by Sulav Ratna Bajracharya.

This research aims to explore the experience of LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal in relation to their exposure to online queerphobic hate speech, the way it influences their emotional, social, and daily lives, and their coping mechanisms, including their attitude towards the institutional support.

If you agree to participate, you will take part in an in-depth interview lasting approximately 45 to 90 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Your involvement is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw or leave any question without reprisal.

All information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and used only for academic purposes. Your name or any identifying details will not be shown in the thesis or any report. Your identity will be kept anonymous by use of pseudonyms, and the transcripts and recordings will be safely kept in password-locked files only available to the researcher.

By signing below, you confirm that you have read and understood the information above and that your questions have been answered. You voluntarily agree to participate and to allow audio recording as indicated.

Participant's Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Researcher's Name: Sulav Ratna Bajracharya Signature: _____

सहमति पत्र

यो अनुसन्धान काठमाडौं विश्वविद्यालय स्कुल अफ एजुकेशनबाट सस्टेनेबल डेभलप्मेन्ट (Sustainable Development) विषयमा स्नातकोत्तर तहको आवश्यकताहरू पूरा गर्नका लागि छात्र सुलभ रत्न बाज्राचार्यद्वारा गरिएको हो।

यस अनुसन्धानको उद्देश्य नेपालमा LGBTQIA+ युवाहरूले इन्टरनेटमा हुने घृणात्मक अभिव्यक्ति (hate speech) को अनुभव कसरी गरेका छन्, यसले उनीहरूको भावनात्मक, सामाजिक, र दैनिक जीवनमा कस्तो प्रभाव पारेको छ, र उनीहरूले यसको सामना कसरी गर्ने गर्छन् भनेर बुझ्नु हो। साथै, संस्थागत समर्थनप्रति उनीहरूको दृष्टिकोण पनि बुझ्ने प्रयास गरिन्छ।

यदि तपाईं अनुसन्धानमा सहभागी हुन सहमत हुनुहुन्छ भने, तपाईं ४५-९० मिनेट लामो अन्तर्वार्तामा भाग लिनुहुनेछ। अन्तर्वार्तामा व्यक्त गरिएका कुरा पछि लिखित रूपमा तयार पार्नका लागि तपाईंको अनुमति लिएर अन्तर्वार्ता अडियो रेकर्ड गरिनेछ। तपाईंको सहभागिता पूर्ण रूपमा स्वेच्छिक रहनेछ, र तपाईंले चाहनुभयो भने कुनै प्रश्न छोड्न वा अन्तर्वार्ता कुनै बेला रोक्न सक्नुहुन्छ।

तपाईंले दिनुभएको सबै जानकारी गोप्य राखिनेछ र शैक्षिक उद्देश्यका लागि मात्र प्रयोग गरिनेछ। रिपोर्टमा तपाईंको नाम वा कुनै पहिचान खुल्ने सूचना देखिने छैन। तपाईंको पहिचान काल्पनिक नाम प्रयोग गरेर गोप्य राखिनेछ। अन्तर्वार्ताका कागजातहरू र रेकर्डिङ अनुसन्धानकर्ताले मात्र पहुँच हुने पासवर्डले सुरक्षित गरेको फाइलमा मिल्नेछ।

माथि दिइएको जानकारी पढ्नुभएको छ, बुझ्नुभएको छ, र तपाईंका प्रश्नहरूको जवाफ पाउनुभएको छ भने तल हस्ताक्षर गरेर पुष्टि गर्नुहोस्। हस्ताक्षर गरेर तपाईं स्वेच्छिक रूपमा सहभागी हुन र अडियो रेकर्डिङ गर्न अनुमति दिनुहुन्छ।

सहभागीको नाम: _____ **मिति:** _____

हस्ताक्षर: _____

अनुसन्धानकर्ताको नाम: सुलभ रत्न बाज्राचार्य **हस्ताक्षर:** _____

Interview Guide

Opening and Consent

1. Introduce yourself and briefly explain the purpose of the study and confidentiality measures.
2. Confirm the participant's consent to take part and to record the interview.
3. Reassure the participant about anonymity and their right to pause or stop at any time.

Section 1: Introduction and Background (Icebreaker)

Purpose: To make participants comfortable, learn about their identity and daily life.

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself? How do you identify in terms of gender and sexual orientation?
    - Probe: How comfortable are you being open about your identity in daily life?
2. What is it like to be part of the queer community in Nepal today?
    - Probe: How would you describe your experiences with acceptance or exclusion, both offline and online?
3. How would you describe your online presence?
    - Probe: How do your family or close relations react to your online activity or expression?

Section 2: Experiences of Online Queerphobic Hate Speech (RQ1)

Purpose: To explore participants' experiences of online hate and its effects on emotional well-being, relationships, and daily life.

4. Can you share any experiences you or someone you know have had with queerphobic content online?
    - Probe: Where did it happen (e.g., social media, comment section, post)?
    - Probe: Who was posting the queerphobic content (e.g., strangers, peers)?
5. How did you feel and respond in that moment?
    - Probe: What emotions did you experience (e.g., shock, anger, sadness, fear)?
    - Probe: Did you reply, ignore, report, or seek support? Why?

6. Have these experiences, whether directed at you or others, affected your offline life?
    - Probe: Did it influence your relationships, visibility, or feelings of safety? How?

Section 3: Coping, Resilience, and Response Strategies (RQ2)

Purpose: To understand how participants navigate, resist, or cope with online hate, and their views on available support systems.

7. When you face hate speech or discrimination online, how do you usually respond?
    - Probe: Do you block, report, stay silent, or confront the person? Why?
8. How do you take care of your emotional well-being after such experiences?
    - Probe: Do you rely on communities, friends, or organizations? Why?
9. Have you ever sought help or reported online hate?
    - Probe: What was that experience like?
    - Probe: Were you satisfied with the response, or did it add to your frustration?
10. How do you feel about the support provided by institutions (family, school, law, social media platforms) for queer people?

Section 4: Reflection and Broader Perspectives

Purpose: To gather participants' views on broader social change and future possibilities.

11. What changes, legal, institutional, or social, are most needed to make online spaces safer for queer people?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with online hate or your hopes for the future of queer rights in Nepal?

अन्तर्वार्ता मार्गदर्शन

सुरुवात र अनुमति

1. आफ्नो परिचय दिनुहोस् र छोटकरीमा अध्ययनको उद्देश्य र गोपनीयता बारे बताउनुहोस्।
2. सहभागीले अन्तर्वार्तामा भाग लिन र रेकर्ड गर्न अनुमति दिएको पुष्टि गर्नुहोस्।
3. सहभागीलाई उनीहरूको पहिचान गोप्य रहन्छ र उनीहरूले चाहँदा अन्तर्वार्ता रोक्न सक्छन् भनेर बताउनुहोस्।

भाग १: परिचय र पृष्ठभूमि

उद्देश्य: सहभागीलाई सहज बनाउनु, अनि उनीहरूको पहिचान र दैनिक जीवन बुझ्नु।

1. तपाईं छोटकरीमा आफ्नो परिचय दिन सक्नुहुन्छ? तपाईं आफ्नो लैङ्गिक र यौनिक पहिचान कसरी बुझ्नुहुन्छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: दैनिक जीवनमा तपाईं आफ्नो पहिचान खुला रूपमा देखाउन कतिको सहज महसुस गर्नुहुन्छ?
2. हालको स्थितिमा नेपालमा क्वेयर समुदायको भाग हुँदा तपाईंको अनुभव कस्तो छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: अनलाइन र अफलाइन दुवै क्षेत्रमा स्वीकार वा अस्वीकार हुनुको अनुभव कस्तो छ?
3. तपाईं अनलाइनमा आफ्नो पहिचान कसरी देखाउनुहुन्छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: तपाईंको परिवार वा नजिकका सम्बन्धहरूले तपाईंको अनलाइन गतिविधि वा अभिव्यक्तिमा कस्तो प्रतिक्रिया देखाउँछन्?

भाग २: अनलाइन घृणाका अनुभवहरू (RQ1)

उद्देश्य: सहभागीहरूले अनलाइन घृणा कसरी अनुभव गर्छन् र यसले भावनात्मक स्वास्थ्य, सम्बन्ध, र दैनिक जीवनमा कस्तो प्रभाव पार्छ भनेर बुझ्नु।

4. तपाईं वा तपाईंले चिनेका कुनै व्यक्तिले अनलाइनमा क्वेयरफोबिक कुरा अनुभव गर्नुभएको छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: यदि छ भने, कहाँ गर्नुभयो (जस्तै: सामाजिक सञ्जाल, कमेन्ट, पोस्ट)?
    - थप प्रश्न: कसले पोष्ट गरेको थियो (नाचिनेका व्यक्ति, साथीहरू)?

5. त्यो समयमा तपाईंले कस्तो महसुस गर्नुभयो र कस्तो प्रतिक्रिया दिनुभयो?
    - थप प्रश्न: तपाईंले कस्ता भावना अनुभव गर्नुभयो (जस्तै: अचम्म, रिस, दुःख, डर)?
    - थप प्रश्न: तपाईंले जवाफ दिनुभयो, बेवास्ता गर्नुभयो, रिपोर्ट गर्नुभयो, वा सहयोग खोज्नुभयो? किन?
6. के यी अनुभवहरूले तपाईंको अफलाइन जीवनमा असर पारेको छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: यसले तपाईंको सम्बन्ध, गोपनीयता, वा सुरक्षामा असर पारेको छ? कसरी?

भाग ३: सामना गर्ने तरिका, सहनशीलता, र प्रतिक्रिया (RQ2)

उद्देश्य: सहभागीहरूले अनलाइन घृणा कसरी सामना गर्छन्, र उपलब्ध समर्थन प्रणालीको बारेमा के विचार राख्छन् भनेर पत्ता लगाउनु।

7. तपाईंले अनलाइन घृणा वा भेदभाव सामना गर्दा सामान्यतया कस्तो प्रतिक्रिया दिनुहुन्छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: ब्लक गर्नुहुन्छ, रिपोर्ट गर्नुहुन्छ, चुप बस्नुहुन्छ, वा जवाफ दिनुहुन्छ? किन?
8. अनलाइन घृणा अनुभव गरेपछि तपाईं आफ्नो भावनात्मक स्वास्थ्य कसरी हेर्नुहुन्छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: समुदाय, साथीहरू, वा संस्था माथि भर पर्नुहुन्छ? किन?
9. यस्तो स्थिति अनुभव गरेपछि तपाईंले कहिल्यै सहयोग खोज्नु भएको छ वा अनलाइन घृणा रिपोर्ट गर्नुभएको छ?
    - थप प्रश्न: तपाईंको अनुभव कस्तो रह्यो?
    - थप प्रश्न: त्यहाँबाट आएको प्रतिक्रिया तपाईंलाई ठीक लाग्यो कि त्यसले झन् तनाव बढायो?
10. केयर व्यक्तिहरूका लागि परिवार, स्कूल, कानून, वा सामाजिक सञ्जालका प्लेटफर्महरूले दिएको समर्थनबारे तपाईंको के विचार छ?

भाग ४: व्यापक दृष्टिकोण र धारणा

उद्देश्य: सामाजिक परिवर्तन र भविष्यका सम्भावनाबारे सहभागीको धारणा बुझ्नु।

11. केयर व्यक्तिहरूका लागि अनलाइन क्षेत्र सुरक्षित बनाउन कस्तो कानुनी, संस्थागत वा सामाजिक परिवर्तन आवश्यक लाग्छ?
12. अनलाइन घृणा वा नेपालमा केयर अधिकारको भविष्यबारे तपाईं अरू केही भन्न चाहनुहुन्छ?