REDEFINING IDENTITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF GAY MALE STUDENTS

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Abstract:

Gay male students in higher education often navigate not only academic and social adjustments but also the personal process of affirming and expressing their sexual identity, which can present unique challenges during their transition into university life. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of five gay male university students using Collaizi's strategy for analyzing in-depth interview data. The findings revealed that participants generally experienced a welcoming academic environment but often approached their transition with cautious identity expression, gradually building self-confidence and authenticity. Sexual identity influenced their educational journey by fostering motivation, resilience, and advocacy for inclusivity, while a combination of supportive relationships and occasional subtle exclusion shaped social integration. Challenges ranged from fear of judgment and stereotypes to isolated incidents of discrimination, addressed through resilience, selective disclosure, and self-care strategies. Support systems—primarily friends, family, mentors, and inclusive organizations—were crucial to fostering belonging and personal growth, though access to formal LGBTQ+ programs varied. Over time, students reported significant personal development, deeper acceptance of their identities, and a clear sense of how their experiences shaped their academic and career goals. These findings underscore the need for universities to strengthen LGBTQ+-inclusive support systems, mentorship opportunities, and safe spaces to ensure that gay male students can thrive both academically and personally.

Keywords: gay male students, university transition, identity development, resilience, LGBTQ+ support

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1. Introduction

The transition to university life is a complex developmental stage for all students, but it poses unique challenges for gay male students. These individuals often navigate not only academic and social adjustments but also the personal process of affirming and disclosing their sexual identity (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Hanna Walker *et al.*, 2022). Fear of discrimination, stigmatization, and rejection can complicate their ability to integrate fully into the campus environment (Rankin *et al.*, 2010; Cain, Denton, Alvarez, & Smith, 2023), and these fears are not unfounded. National data show that sexual minority students face disproportionately high rates of harassment and victimization compared to heterosexual peers (Kann *et al.*, 2016; Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016), with 34% of LGB youth reporting bullying versus 19% of heterosexual youth, and nearly two-thirds experiencing harassment specifically due to their sexual orientation.

For many gay male students, this period coincides with a critical stage of self-discovery, making the experience of transition both formative and potentially distressing (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). Research indicates that discriminatory bullying has harmful effects on mental health, school connectedness, and academic achievement (Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014). LGB college students are significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to report feeling unsafe on campus, verbal harassment, and a hostile climate (Rankin *et al.*, 2010; Silver, Krietzberg, & Kalaivanan, 2021). These experiences are linked to elevated risks of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Kerr, Santurri, & Peters, 2012; Woodford *et al.*, 2018; Sotardi, Surtees, Vincent, & Johnston, 2022), underscoring how fear of prejudice can undermine their social integration and well-being.

Understanding the transitional experiences of gay male students is therefore essential for creating inclusive and supportive university environments. Evidence from secondary and postsecondary contexts shows that safe and affirming climates—facilitated by explicit anti-discrimination policies, supportive peer networks, and visible LGBTQ+ representation—are linked to reduced victimization and improved academic outcomes (Russell, Day, Ioverno, & Toomey, 2015; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Seelman, Walls, Hazel, & Wisneski, 2012). Such climates are critical in counteracting the persistence of structural inequalities and heteronormative norms that marginalize sexual minority students (Cain *et al.*, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2016).

Previous studies on LGBTQ+ students' transitions have explored identity development, campus climate, and mental health outcomes (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2016; Cain *et al.*, 2023). Foundational frameworks such as Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity development and D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model emphasize that sexual identity formation is fluid and context-dependent. These models complement Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Theory, which links prejudice and stigma to adverse mental health, and Erikson's (1968) Psychosocial Development Theory, which situates identity formation as a central developmental task of emerging adulthood. Narrative

studies show that affirming faculty, inclusive peer groups, and access to LGBTQ+ resources improve transition experiences (Cain *et al.*, 2023; Sotardi *et al.*, 2022), whereas exclusionary practices and lack of representation inhibit open and confident participation (Silver *et al.*, 2021; Kosciw *et al.*, 2016).

Despite these insights, much of the existing research treats LGBTQ+ students as a monolithic group, often overlooking the distinctive experiences of gay male students. Few studies have examined how gay men, in particular, negotiate the early stages of university life across academic, social, and emotional domains (Cain *et al.*, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2016). This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of gay male students during their transition into university, focusing on identity expression, social integration, and personal growth. It examines initial adjustment experiences, the influence of sexual identity on academic engagement and self-definition, and interactions in social and interpersonal contexts. It also identifies the challenges encountered, coping mechanisms employed, and the role of support systems and institutional resources in shaping their well-being.

Ultimately, this research seeks to inform universities striving to create inclusive and equitable educational spaces. By understanding the unique transitional needs of gay male students, institutions can design targeted interventions that foster belonging, resilience, and academic success. The findings will not only contribute to institutional policy and staff training but also align with global commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals—specifically SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)—by promoting inclusive higher education that values diversity and actively combats discrimination.

2. Method

2.1 Study Participants

The participants in this study are gay male university students currently navigating the process of transitioning into university life. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the potential stigma surrounding sexual orientation in specific social and cultural contexts, the researcher used a snowball sampling technique to identify participants. This method is beneficial when engaging with populations that may be difficult to access directly due to privacy concerns or fear of discrimination (Oregon State University, 2017). Initial participants were identified through trusted contacts and then invited to recommend other students who met the study's inclusion criteria.

For this phenomenological study, the researcher aimed for 5 participants, which aligns with Creswell's (2013) recommendation that phenomenological research typically involves 3–15 participants to capture varied lived experiences while maintaining depth of analysis. This sample size allows for a nuanced understanding of how gay male students experience the transition into university life, balancing diversity with the feasibility of in-depth qualitative engagement. The study was conducted in various

locations on campus and in neutral, safe spaces within the community to ensure participants felt comfortable and secure.

2.2 Materials and Instruments

The primary data-gathering tool for this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The questions were designed to elicit rich, narrative responses aligned with the research objectives, focusing on identity disclosure, experiences of belonging, academic and social adjustments, and perceptions of institutional support.

2.3 Design and Procedure

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of gay male students transitioning into university life. The phenomenological approach is particularly suited to examining deeply personal and socially complex phenomena, allowing participants to share their perspectives in their own words (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

Data collection followed several steps. First, permission letters were provided to prospective participants, clearly explaining the research's nature, scope, and purpose, along with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Using snowball sampling, the researcher began with one participant and expanded the sample through referrals. Interviews were conducted in-person or via secure online platforms, depending on the participant's preference and comfort level. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, providing sufficient time for participants to elaborate on their experiences.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to established ethical standards for qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, ensuring they fully understood the study's purpose, potential risks, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality was prioritized by anonymizing all identifying details and securely storing digital and printed materials. The researcher also took steps to ensure that no questions would place participants at risk of psychological harm, and referrals to campus counseling services were available upon request. Ethical clearance was secured from the university's Institutional Review Board before data collection commenced.

2.5 Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation (Clark & Vealé, 2018). The researcher's role in this study involved asking questions and actively listening, establishing rapport, and fostering an environment in which participants felt safe sharing personal narratives. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process to acknowledge the researcher's positionalities and minimize potential biases. The researcher is also committed to treating all information with strict confidentiality and ensuring that findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives.

2.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, which is designed to extract, organize, and describe the essential meanings of participants' lived experiences. First, interview transcripts were read multiple times to achieve an overall understanding of the content. Significant statements relevant to the phenomenon under study were then identified and extracted. These statements were formulated into meanings, staying as close to the participants' original expressions. The formulated meanings were clustered into themes organized to reflect patterns across participants' narratives. An exhaustive description of the phenomenon was then developed, integrating all themes into a coherent account. Finally, the findings were validated by returning to participants for member checking to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of interpretations. This systematic process ensured that the analysis remained faithful to the participants' lived experiences while capturing the depth and complexity of the phenomenon.

2.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure credibility, the researcher engaged in member checking, where participants were allowed to review and confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts and the preliminary themes derived from their data. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the study context and participant demographics, enabling other researchers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings. Dependability and confirmability were reinforced through maintaining an audit trail of all research activities and decisions, as well as reflective notes documenting the researcher's thought processes and methodological choices.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Experiences of Gay Male Students during their Transition into University Life

The transition into university life for gay male students emerged as a multifaceted experience shaped by perceptions of inclusivity, evolving identity expression, and adaptation to academic and social demands (Table 1). Several participants described the University as a welcoming and diverse environment, noting that faculty, staff, and peers generally demonstrated acceptance (P1, P2). This aligns with Glazzard, Jindal-Snape, and Stones (2020), who found that supportive and inclusive higher education environments foster smoother transitions for LGBTQ+ students and strengthen their sense of belonging (Glazzard *et al.*, 2020). Sense of belonging is also linked to improved academic engagement and well-being among LGBTQ+ students (Day *et al.*, 2019; Garvey *et al.*, 2024). However, consistent with Arnett's (2000) notion of emerging adulthood as a period of intense identity exploration, participants also reported mixed emotions—balancing hope and excitement with anxiety and uncertainty—particularly at the onset of their academic journey (P3, P4).

The process of gradual identity expression was a recurring theme. Some students adopted a cautious approach in openly expressing their sexuality until they could gauge the openness of their peers (P3). Others felt comfortable expressing their identity naturally, with recognition occurring indirectly through nonverbal cues (P1, P2, P5). These findings resonate with D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model of sexual identity development, emphasizing that disclosure is a nonlinear, context-dependent process. Positive peer relationships played a crucial role in affirming identity and fostering confidence (P3), supporting the work of D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998), who identified peer support as a protective factor in sexual minority identity formation. Peer affirmation and safe spaces further contribute to resilience and well-being in sexual minority students (Kosciw *et al.*, 2024).

Adapting to academic and social demands varied among participants. For some, minimal adjustments were necessary, as academic priorities outweighed social concerns (P1). Others viewed being openly gay as advantageous for building connections and networks (P3). Yet, several participants emphasized the need to improve time management, organizational skills, and participation in group work to thrive in university life (P3, P5). This is consistent with Woodford, Kulick, and Attebury (2015), who observed that LGBTQ+ students' academic integration often depends on personal initiative and institutional support structures. Moreover, perceived academic support significantly predicts academic success among LGBTQ+ students across cultural contexts (Tan *et al.*, 2025).

Table 1: Experiences of Gay Male Students during their Transition into University Life

Emergent Themes	Clustered Themes
Welcoming but Emotionally Mixed Transition	- Perception of inclusivity and acceptance in the university environment (P1, P2). - Mixed emotions of excitement, hope, and anxiety upon entry (P3). - Curiosity and cautious approach to making friends and finding acceptance (P4). - Early impressions shaped by attraction to peers (P5).
Gradual Identity Expression and Acceptance	- Initial hesitance and cautious self-expression until trust is built (P3). - Comfort in expressing identity naturally without formal disclosure (P1, P2). - Identity affirmation through supportive friendships (P3). - Balancing fear and excitement in early identity expression (P4). - Unintentional identity disclosure through behavior or mannerisms (P5).
Adapting to Academic and Social Demands	- Minimal adjustments needed for those prioritizing academics (P1). - Viewing being gay as advantageous in social contexts (P3). - Time management, organization, and participation in group activities are needed (P3, P5). - Becoming approachable and confident in social interactions (P3). - Balancing studies and social life through seeking supportive peers and groups (P4).
Personal Growth and Openness	- Active efforts to connect with supportive peers and groups (P4). - Overcoming shyness and improving communication skills (P5). - Developing open-mindedness and adaptability in diverse environments (P5).

Finally, the transition period contributed to personal growth and openness. Participants spoke of becoming more proactive in seeking supportive communities (P4), overcoming shyness, and enhancing communication skills (P5). Exposure to diverse perspectives fostered greater open-mindedness and adaptability. This aligns with Bregman *et al.* (2013), who linked positive LGBTQ+ identity development to better psychological adjustment, and Stevens (2004), who highlighted that college environments provide fertile ground for identity consolidation when support systems are present. A strong sense of belonging within LGBTQ+ student organizations has also been shown to reduce distress and promote academic persistence (Penn State University, 2024).

The findings affirm that while a generally inclusive environment facilitates the adjustment of gay male students, their transition remains a layered process shaped by internal self-discovery, selective identity disclosure, and proactive adaptation to academic and social contexts. Consistent with Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), even in accepting environments, gay male students navigate subtle anxieties and anticipate possible stigma, underscoring the importance of sustained institutional inclusivity and visible support networks. LGBTQ+ resource centers and student-led initiatives remain key institutional mechanisms for improving retention and fostering belonging (Beemyn *et al.*, 2005).

3.2 Influence of Sexual Identity on the Academic Experiences of Gay Male Students

The academic journeys of gay male students are significantly shaped by their sexual identity, which influences motivation, confidence, and their approaches to learning. For several participants, their identity served as a source of motivation and academic drive, inspiring them to work harder, develop strong social connections, and engage more confidently in academic activities such as class presentations (P1, P2). Some reported that being part of a marginalized group strengthened their determination to excel and demonstrate capability beyond stereotypes, often channeling their efforts toward advocacy and inclusive leadership (P3, P4). One participant noted that although their identity initially caused apprehension and self-restraint, it later became a source of empowerment, encouraging them to participate more actively in academic and extracurricular activities (P5). These experiences echo findings by Fassinger (1997) and Arnett (2000), who highlight that identity development in emerging adulthood can motivate personal achievement when situated in supportive environments. Similar patterns are observed in recent research showing that LGBTQ+ identity can foster resilience, activism, and leadership when supported by affirming peers and faculty (Garvey *et al.*, 2024; Kosciw *et al.*, 2024).

The theme of navigating acceptance and inclusion in the learning environment reflects a spectrum of experiences, from maintaining strict boundaries between personal and academic life (P1) to expressing identity freely in safe contexts such as presentations (P2). Some participants initially hesitated to be open in group settings due to fear of judgment, but gradually embraced greater openness as acceptance from peers increased (P3). Others actively sought out supportive spaces and initiated discussions on diversity

to foster a more inclusive classroom climate (P4). One participant described subtle exclusion in group work, motivating them to collaborate selectively with open-minded peers (P5). This progression aligns with D'Augelli's (1994) model of sexual identity development, which conceptualizes disclosure as fluid and context-dependent, and with Rankin (2005), who documented that campus climate significantly affects the willingness of LGBTQ+ students to engage academically. Contemporary research also shows that perceived campus safety and inclusivity influence LGBTQ+ students' classroom participation and willingness to disclose their identity (Woodford *et al.*, 2015; Garvey & Rankin, 2015).

Table 2: Influence of Sexual Identity on the Academic Experiences of Gay Male Students

Emergent Themes	Clustered Themes
Identity as a Source of Motivation and Academic Drive	- Identity motivated working harder and being more sociable in academic life (P1). - Increased confidence in presentations (P2). - Identity strengthened resolve to achieve success regardless of adversity and inspired using voice for inclusion (P3). - Advocacy for diversity and inclusion through student leadership (P4). – Identity evolved from a perceived vulnerability to a source of empowerment, increasing engagement and determination (P5).
Navigating Acceptance and Inclusion in the Learning Environment	- Maintained personal–academic boundaries to manage disclosure (P1). - Comfort and authenticity in presentations (P2). - Initial hesitation in group settings due to fear of judgment, which later shifted to open self-expression with acceptance (P3). - Actively sought supportive spaces and encouraged diversity discussions (P4). - Experienced subtle exclusion in group work, which motivated seeking open-minded peers (P5).
University as a Space for Self-Discovery and Affirmation	- Discovered more about self through socializing with diverse peers (P1). - Diverse student body provided opportunities to explore and rediscover identity (P2). - Acceptance and support from peers fostered pride and confidence as a gay student (P3). - Exposure to new communities deepened self-understanding and shaped values (P4). - University experience encouraged openness, participation, and authentic self-expression, clarifying personal beliefs and goals (P5).

University life also emerged as a catalyst for self-discovery and affirmation. Interaction with a diverse student body enabled participants to uncover aspects of their personality and identity they had not previously recognized (P1, P2). Supportive relationships fostered confidence, pride, and a stronger sense of belonging (P3, P4). Others described how exposure to diverse perspectives deepened their understanding of themselves and helped shape their personal values and life goals (P4, P6). These accounts resonate with Bilodeau and Renn (2005), who emphasize that identity consolidation is reinforced when LGBTQ+ students encounter affirming environments, and with Bregman *et al.* (2013), who associate positive identity affirmation with better psychological adjustment and

personal growth. Furthermore, Stevens (2004) underscores that higher education provides fertile ground for identity integration, especially when students have access to peer and institutional support systems. Recent studies confirm that inclusive campus environments accelerate self-acceptance and identity integration in LGBTQ+ students, leading to improved academic persistence and well-being (Tan *et al.*, 2025).

The findings suggest that sexual identity, while initially a potential source of vulnerability, often evolves into a foundation for personal empowerment, academic engagement, and leadership. These experiences support the principles of the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), which recognizes the role of both internal and external factors in shaping the well-being and success of sexual minority students. They also reflect Glazzard *et al.*'s (2020) argument that inclusive and affirming higher education environments enable LGBTQ+ students to succeed academically and personally (Glazzard *et al.*, 2020).

3.3 Social and Interpersonal Relationship Experiences of Gay Male Students

The findings reveal that social and interpersonal relationships for gay male students in university are shaped by a gradual process of trust-building, varying degrees of acceptance, and strategic navigation of social spaces. Many participants described the progressive formation of friendships and relationships as a journey that often began with casual, classroom-based interactions but required time and mutual trust to develop into deeper connections. While some found it relatively easy to establish friendly acquaintances (P1), others noted that forming "true" or more meaningful relationships was more challenging (P2). Several participants initially struggled with shyness and fear of rejection, which limited their early social engagement. However, with increased openness, they could connect with supportive and understanding peers (P3). Shared academic activities, such as attending classes and study sessions, were important spaces for building strong relationships (P4). For some, initial hesitance due to fear of judgment gradually gave way to trust and meaningful friendships with open-minded and affirming peers (P5). These accounts align with D'Augelli's (1994) identity development model, highlighting that safe, affirming interpersonal contexts often facilitate openness and disclosure. Similarly, Bilodeau and Renn (2005) emphasize that identity formation for LGBTQ+ students is strengthened in environments that encourage academic and social integration. Recent research supports this, showing that social support networks significantly improve belonging and persistence among LGBTQ+ students (Garvey *et al.*, 2024; Wolfe & Betancur, 2023).

Table 3: Social and Interpersonal Relationship Experiences of Gay Male Students

Emergent Themes	Clustered Themes
Progressive Formation of Friendships and Relationships	- Friendships are easy to form in casual settings like class interactions (P1). - Making authentic, meaningful relationships is more challenging (P2). - Shyness and fear of rejection initially hindered forming friendships, but openness over time led to genuine and supportive relationships (P3). - Shared academic activities such as attending classes and studying fostered strong social bonds (P4). - Initial hesitation due to fear of judgment gave way to forming trust with open-minded peers who provided emotional support (P5).
Mixed Experiences of Acceptance and Inclusion	- Felt accepted by open-minded and non-conservative peers (P1). - No significant personal experience of exclusion (P2). - Positive treatment by professors and inclusive organizations reinforced a sense of value, despite occasional subtle exclusion (P3). - Experienced acceptance and exclusion, shaping understanding of community and inclusion (P4). - Strong experiences of acceptance from professors and peers and recognition that acceptance is not universal (P5).
Strategic Navigation of Potentially Non-Accepting Spaces	- Chooses to focus on beneficial activities and ignore negativity (P1). - Adjusts behavior while respecting personal beliefs and others' perspectives (P2). - Carefully evaluates social situations, protecting personal boundaries and energy while relying on support systems (P3). - Focuses on finding allies and fostering understanding in safe spaces (P4). - Exercise caution in unfamiliar or uncertain settings, keeping a respectful distance if acceptance is lacking (P5).

Participants also reported mixed experiences of acceptance and inclusion. Several experienced openness and validation from peers who were non-conservative and welcoming of diversity (P1). Others did not recall significant exclusion (P2), while some mainly described favorable treatment from professors and inclusive organizations, albeit with occasional subtle exclusion such as being left out of conversations (P3). A few encountered acceptance and exclusion, shaping their broader understanding of community and the need for inclusion (P4). For others, professors and peers offered strong support and respect regardless of sexual identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging (P5). These findings echo Rankin (2005) and Woodford and Kulick (2015), who found that campus climate for sexual minority students is often a combination of supportive and exclusionary experiences, with institutional and peer acceptance playing a key role in students' well-being. More recent studies confirm that campus inclusivity directly correlates with higher academic engagement, social satisfaction, and reduced psychological distress for LGBTQ+ students (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Patterson *et al.*, 2022).

In navigating potentially non-accepting spaces, participants employed strategies to protect their emotional well-being while maintaining authenticity. Some focused on activities that benefited them and avoided engagement with negativity (P1), while others adjusted their behavior to balance respect for personal beliefs with the need for

self-preservation (P2). Several participants described carefully evaluating social contexts, protecting their energy, and seeking safe, supportive networks (P3, P4). Others adopted a cautious approach when sensing potential judgment, maintaining respectful boundaries until they felt assured of acceptance (P5). These strategies are consistent with the principles of the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), which suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals develop adaptive coping strategies to mitigate the effects of potential stigma. Furthermore, Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Braun (2006) emphasize that selective disclosure and strategic social navigation are standard protective mechanisms for maintaining self-esteem and safety in less inclusive environments. Additional contemporary evidence confirms that such adaptive strategies can buffer against discrimination's adverse effects on mental health and academic persistence (Kosciw *et al.*, 2024; Wolfe & Betancur, 2023).

The findings indicate that while gay male students in this study were often able to form supportive and affirming social networks within the university, they remained mindful of potential exclusion and developed adaptive strategies to maintain their psychological safety. These results reinforce the importance of inclusive campus policies, peer education, and visible LGBTQ+ advocacy, as highlighted by Glazzard *et al.* (2020), in fostering academic success and meaningful social integration for sexual minority students (Glazzard *et al.*, 2020).

3.4 Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Gay Male Students in the University

The experiences of gay male students in navigating university life revealed a spectrum of challenges, from minimal barriers to more significant encounters with judgment and subtle discrimination. Some participants reported minimal to no challenges, describing their sexuality as either not affecting their university experience or even serving as a social advantage (P1, P2). Others described moderate challenges such as fear of being judged or stereotyped, particularly in unfamiliar settings like group work or new social circles (P3). Subtle forms of discrimination, including exclusion from conversations and hearing insensitive comments, were also noted (P3, P4). A few participants encountered persistent social acceptance issues, facing uncomfortable remarks or perceived judgment, initially hindering their ability to form genuine friendships (P5). These findings reflect Rankin's (2005) assertion that LGBTQ+ students experience campus climates in complex ways — often benefiting from supportive environments while still navigating pockets of prejudice. They also align with Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model, which suggests that even in generally inclusive settings, the anticipation of stigma can shape social and academic behaviors. Similar findings have been observed in more recent research, which highlights that microaggressions and subtle forms of exclusion continue to be a key challenge for sexual minority students in higher education (Garvey *et al.*, 2017).

Table 4: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Gay Male Students in the University

Emergent Themes	Clustered Themes
Minimal to Moderate Challenges in University Life	- No challenges experienced; views sexuality as an advantage (P1, P2). - Fear of being judged or stereotyped in unfamiliar settings (P3). - Experiences of stereotypes, occasional discrimination, and navigating social acceptance (P4). - Struggles with subtle judgment, uncomfortable remarks, and difficulty building genuine friendships initially (P5).
Resilient and Adaptive Responses to Discrimination	- Chooses to ignore negativity and focus on self-resilience (P1). - Maintains respect for others but walks away if boundaries are crossed (P2). - Addresses prejudice calmly, corrects respectfully when safe, and relies on supportive peers (P3). - Actively addresses discrimination, seeks allies, and educates others (P4). - Learns to "pick battles," sometimes addressing hurtful remarks with polite explanations (P5).
Strategic Coping and Self-Preservation	- Engages in leisure activities, socializing, and fun for stress relief (P1). - Maintains openness and avoids self-comparison; goes with the flow (P2). - Practices self-care, sets boundaries, seeks safe spaces, and surrounds self with supportive peers (P3). - Builds connections, promotes inclusivity, and focuses on positive activities (P4). - Keeps focused on goals, surrounds self with encouraging friends, and draws strength from a trusted few (P5).

When faced with discrimination, participants employed resilient and adaptive responses. Some chose to disengage from negativity and focus on self-resilience (P1), while others maintained respect for differing opinions but removed themselves when situations became intolerable (P2). For others, coping involved directly addressing prejudice: calmly correcting misconceptions, speaking up when safe, and drawing strength from supportive friends or classmates (P3). Several participants took a more proactive approach by confronting discrimination directly, seeking allies, and engaging in educational dialogue to foster understanding (P4). One participant described learning to "pick battles," addressing only those remarks they felt could be changed through constructive conversation (P5). These strategies align with D'Augelli's (1994) identity development framework, which emphasizes that disclosure and advocacy are often context-dependent, and with Rosario *et al*. (2006), who note that selective engagement is a common protective mechanism for LGBTQ+ individuals in potentially unsafe spaces. This aligns with findings by Vaccaro and Mena (2011), who note that LGBTQ+ college students often adapt their disclosure strategies and advocacy efforts based on perceived safety and potential outcomes (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011).

Participants also identified strategic coping and self-preservation as essential to thriving in university life. For some, this meant engaging in leisure activities, reading, and socializing to maintain balance and reduce stress (P1). Others emphasized the importance of openness and avoiding self-comparison, choosing to "go with the flow" rather than internalizing negativity (P2). Many participants highlighted the role of self-care practices, such as journaling, resting, seeking safe spaces, and surrounding

themselves with supportive peers (P3). Some viewed building connections, promoting inclusivity, and focusing on positive activities as central to resilience (P4). Others stressed the value of focusing on long-term goals and drawing strength from a small, trusted circle of friends (P5). These approaches are consistent with Bregman *et al.* (2013), who link positive LGBTQ+ identity development to greater psychological well-being, and Glazzard *et al.* (2020), who argue that safe, affirming social networks enhance both academic and personal outcomes for LGBTQ+ students. Recent studies have also emphasized the protective role of peer support, LGBTQ+ campus organizations, and access to affirming mental health services in fostering resilience and belonging (Woodford *et al.*, 2018).

These findings demonstrate that while not all gay male students experience overt challenges in university, those who do often respond with resilience, strategic navigation, and proactive self-care. It reflects a broader pattern in LGBTQ+ student literature: resilience is fostered through supportive relationships, self-affirmation, and intentional boundary-setting in potentially unsafe spaces (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Woodford, Kulick, & Attebury, 2015). As such, universities play a crucial role in sustaining environments where these coping strategies can flourish, ensuring that all students — regardless of sexual orientation — can thrive both academically and personally.

3.5 Role of Support Systems and Institutional Responses in Facilitating the Transition

Findings indicate that gay male students rely heavily on emotional and social support from personal networks as a cornerstone of their university experience. Friends were consistently identified as primary sources of acceptance, encouragement, and safe spaces for authentic self-expression (P1, P4, P5). Family members also played a critical role; while some maintained traditional expectations, they nonetheless provided a foundation of care and gradual acceptance (P2, P3). For many, the most meaningful support came from a close circle of family and friends who offered steady, nonjudgmental encouragement, reinforcing confidence and a sense of belonging (P3). Mentors and instructors also emerged as significant figures, offering guidance that helped students navigate academic and social challenges (P4, P5). These findings align with Bregman *et al.* (2013), who emphasize that affirming relationships enhance psychological adjustment and identity development among LGBTQ+ individuals, and with Glazzard *et al.* (2020), who found that inclusive support networks help sexual minority students thrive socially and academically.

Table 5: Role of Support Systems and Institutional Responses in Facilitating the Transition

Emergent Themes	Clustered Themes
1. Emotional and Social Support from Personal Networks	- Relies on emotional support from friends (P1). - Family is welcoming and accepting, though some members still hold traditional expectations (P2). - Greatest support comes from close family and friends who provide a safe space and quiet encouragement, helping boost confidence (P3). - Friends, family, mentors, and inclusive organizations offer emotional support, guidance, and help navigating challenges (P4). - Friends and family provide acceptance, comfort, and encouragement, while mentors and instructors offer motivation (P5).
2. Limited to Mixed Access to LGBTQ+ or Diversity Programs	- No access or participation in LGBTQ+ programs (P1). - Lack of participation due to being a working student (P2). - No formal program access; growth achieved through personal networks and self-reliance (P3). - Participation in LGBTQ+ programs fostered community, provided safe spaces, advocacy opportunities, and connections with like-minded peers (P4). - LGBTQ+ programs and diversity initiatives provided a sense of safety, belonging, and peer support through shared experiences (P5).
3. Recommendations for Improving University Support	- Create a student-led LGBTQ+ advocacy and welfare organization (P1). - Maintain an environment that supports self-discovery (P2). - Recognize that self-care is a personal priority, but remain open to structured support when needed (P3). - Expand LGBTQ+ resources, mentorship programs, safe spaces, awareness campaigns, and inclusive policies (P4). - Establish more safe spaces, LGBTQ+ organizations, and orientation sessions on gender identity and inclusivity to foster tolerance and acceptance (P5).

Access to formal institutional support, however, varied considerably. Some participants reported no engagement with LGBTQ+ or diversity programs (P1, P2), often citing time constraints—particularly among working students—or a preference for self-reliance and informal support systems (P3). Others described significant benefits from participation in LGBTQ+ initiatives, which offered safe spaces for expression, advocacy resources, and opportunities to connect with like-minded peers (P4, P5). These programs fostered safety, belonging, and solidarity, reducing feelings of isolation. Such findings reflect Rankin's (2005) observation that campus-based LGBTQ+ programs enhance social integration and affirm identity, and are consistent with Bilodeau and Renn's (2005) argument that structured support networks are critical for identity consolidation in higher education.

Participants also shared recommendations for improving university support structures. Suggestions included establishing a student-led LGBTQ+ advocacy and welfare organization (P1), cultivating an environment conducive to self-discovery (P2), and maintaining a balance between institutional resources and personal self-care (P3). More comprehensive proposals called for expanding LGBTQ+ resources, developing mentorship programs, increasing safe spaces, launching awareness campaigns, and implementing inclusive policies to foster a culture of belonging (P4). Some participants specifically recommended integrating orientation sessions on gender identity and

inclusivity to enhance understanding among the wider student body (P5). These proposals echo Stevens' (2004) assertion that inclusive policies, visible representation, and proactive institutional measures are essential for sexual minority student well-being. They also align with Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model, which underscores the importance of supportive institutional environments in mitigating minority-related stress.

3.6 Redefining the Sense of Self in Academia

The findings reveal that gay male students experienced substantial personal growth and increased self-confidence throughout their university journey. For some, this growth stemmed from becoming more comfortable in their learning environment and progressing steadily over time (P1, P2). Others described a transformation into more self-assured, independent individuals, capable of managing challenges without losing focus on their goals (P3). Several participants connected their development to gaining leadership experience, engaging in advocacy, and deepening their understanding of diverse perspectives (P4). Others reflected on a journey from shyness and fear of rejection toward greater self-acceptance and confidence in expressing their authentic selves (P5). These experiences align with Bilodeau and Renn's (2005) framework on LGBTQ+ student development, which emphasizes that supportive environments and leadership opportunities accelerate identity consolidation and self-confidence.

Participants also described a deepened understanding and acceptance of their sexual identity. Exposure to diverse friendships and peer networks helped some students better understand themselves (P1, P2). Several moved beyond viewing being gay as a limitation, instead embracing it as a source of strength, empowerment, and pride (P3). Others expressed a growing sense of self-worth, often through advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights and celebrating their uniqueness (P4). Even those who initially felt confusion or fear recognized their journey as a pathway toward maturity and acceptance (P5). These reflections resonate with Fassinger's (1997) model of sexual identity development, which frames identity integration as a gradual shift from internalized stigma toward pride and advocacy.

For many, their identity became a driver of academic and career ambitions. Some described being openly gay as a source of determination and purpose, motivating them to remain authentic while contributing to a more accepting society (P1, P2). Others drew on their resilience and lived experiences as a foundation for fostering inclusivity in their fields and communities (P3, P4). Several viewed academic and professional success as a means to counter societal judgment and challenge stereotypes (P5). These perspectives align with Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model, which highlights how marginalized identities, when supported, can foster resilience, motivation, and the drive to excel.

Table 6: Redefining the Sense of Self in Academia

Emergent Themes	Clustered Themes
Personal Growth and Increased Self-Confidence	- Greater comfort and confidence in the learning environment (P1, P2). - Maturation in self-belief, independence, and ability to navigate challenges while staying goal-focused (P3). - Growth in confidence, leadership, advocacy, and understanding diverse perspectives (P4). - Transformation from shyness and fear to gradual self-acceptance (P5).
Deepened Understanding and Acceptance of Identity	- Identity evolved through friendships and exposure to diversity (P1, P2). - Shift from viewing being gay as a limitation to embracing it as a source of strength and empowerment (P3). - Acceptance of uniqueness and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights (P4). - Maturation in understanding of self despite initial fear and confusion (P5).
Identity as a Driver of Academic and Career Ambitions	- Identity fuels determination, purpose, and higher-quality work (P1). - Staying true to oneself while navigating gradual societal acceptance (P2). - Resilience and purpose inspire advocacy, inclusive practices, and community impact (P3). - Advocacy for diversity and inclusivity as a professional goal (P4). - Desire to succeed as proof against societal judgment and misunderstanding (P5).
Reflective Insights and Messages for Others	- Encouragement to find one's true self despite challenges, with reassurance of available support (P2). - Staying friendly and positive builds lasting relationships and aids personal transition (P3). - Recognition of transformative growth through embracing identity and community support (P4). - Acceptance of early fear as part of the journey, recognizing it as a catalyst for courage and self-acceptance (P5).

Participants also offered advice and encouragement to others navigating similar transitions. Some urged new students to embrace the opportunity for self-discovery and trust that supportive people would emerge along the way (P2). Others emphasized maintaining friendliness and positivity, noting that such an approach helped them form meaningful relationships and eased their transition (P3). Several highlighted the transformative role of embracing one's identity and surrounding oneself with affirming communities (P4). One participant encouraged accepting early fears as a natural stage in the journey, reframing them as stepping stones toward courage, self-acceptance, and personal growth (P5). These insights echo Glazzard *et al.*'s (2020) findings that visible LGBTQ+ role models and affirming peer networks empower individuals to live authentically.

4. Concluding Remarks and Implications for Practice

This study explored the lived experiences of gay male students transitioning into university life, focusing on personal growth, academic and social experiences, challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and the redefinition of self in academia. Across all

themes, findings reveal that the university journey for these students is a multidimensional process characterized by opportunities and obstacles.

A generally inclusive and welcoming environment shaped the transition into university, although mixed emotions, initial caution, and selective identity disclosure often accompanied it. Academic experiences were influenced by sexual identity in ways that motivated perseverance, advocacy, and self-determination. Social and interpersonal relationships played a pivotal role, with friendships and supportive networks providing emotional safety and validation. However, subtle exclusion, stereotypes, and occasional discrimination highlighted challenges that required resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms.

Support systems—particularly from friends, family, mentors, and, in some cases, LGBTQ+ programs—were vital to student success and well-being. For those with limited access to formal institutional programs, personal networks and self-created support systems served as essential lifelines. Over time, participants reported significant personal growth, deeper acceptance of their identities, and a clearer understanding of how their experiences as gay men shaped their academic and career aspirations.

Collectively, these experiences illustrate that while gay male students can and do thrive in higher education, their success is often contingent upon the presence of affirming environments, inclusive policies, and sustained opportunities for identity expression. Their journeys reflect resilience, self-advocacy, and university life's transformative potential when diversity is respected and celebrated.

The findings of this study underscore the need for universities to strengthen institutional support structures for gay male students. This can be achieved by expanding LGBTQ+ programs, mentorship opportunities, and safe spaces that foster self-expression without fear of judgment. These initiatives must be made accessible to all students, including working students and those who may be hesitant to participate in formal programs. Promoting inclusive pedagogy and a welcoming campus climate is equally essential. Faculty and staff should be trained to adopt inclusive teaching strategies, address discriminatory behaviors promptly, and integrate diversity and gender-sensitivity discussions into orientation sessions, leadership training, and classroom activities.

Peer education and allyship should also be encouraged through student-led advocacy groups, awareness campaigns, and training programs that challenge stereotypes and cultivate mutual respect across the student body. Moreover, resilience-building and self-advocacy skills should be prioritized by offering workshops and counseling services that equip students with strategies to navigate discrimination, assert their identity, and maintain a strong sense of belonging. Career development services should be inclusive of sexual identity considerations by offering role models, networking opportunities, and professional guidance tailored to the needs of LGBTQ+ students. Finally, universities should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their support programs by gathering feedback from the very communities they serve, ensuring that

initiatives remain relevant, responsive, and impactful in promoting the well-being and success of gay male students.

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