Navigating Identities Abroad: Understanding the Study Abroad Experiences of Transgender and Gender Expansive Individuals

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This study delved into the intersection of gender and culture by examining the experiences of three trans and/or gender-expansive undergraduate students engaged in study abroad programs. Through thematic analysis of data obtained from both a focus group and individual follow-up interviews, seven key themes emerged. In light of the normalization of study abroad within the American undergraduate experience, this research highlights the need for institutions to recognize the unique impact of such programs on specific student demographics. It unpacks the distinctive joys (community bonding, self-discovery, cultural insights) and challenges (gender-related scrutiny, isolation, instances of sexual violence) experienced by Gender Minority Individuals students during study abroad. Furthermore, the study outlines areas warranting further investigation and recommends actionable strategies for institutions to better support these students.

Keywords: Intersections of Gender, Distinctive Joy, Trans Students, Isolation.

Introduction:

The study abroad experience holds immense potential for enriching the lives of Gender Minority Individuals (GMI) students when accompanied by robust support networks and adequate resources. Bryant and Soria's findings underscored that numerous LGBTQ+ students opt for study abroad programs as a means to explore and understand their gender and sexual identities more deeply, fostering heightened self-awareness. Additionally, a study conducted in 2012 highlighted that returning study-abroad participants often reported improvements in traits such as patience, adaptability, cultural acumen, and the ability to navigate unfamiliar environments. Moreover, data from the Institute for International Education showed that a significant proportion of students perceived their study abroad experiences as beneficial in securing subsequent job opportunities and uncovering unexplored career paths. Despite these positive aspects, similar to lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, GMI community members encounter unique stressors that significantly impact their mental and physical well-being. The concept of "minority stress," proposed by Meyer, delineates the excess stress borne by individuals holding marginalized or minority social positions due to the stigma attached to their identities. Within this framework, two interrelated stress categories emerge distal and proximal stressors. Distal stressors encompass instances of rejection, discrimination, harassment, and violence across various spheres of life, while these external pressures often lead to internal stressors like fear of continued discrimination or violence and the adoption of negative beliefs about one's own identity and others sharing that identity due to societal stigmatization. Although initially focused on LGB communities, adaptations of the minority stress model have extended its relevance to GMI communities as well. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of climate change on biodiversity in tropical rain. Studying abroad often represents the initial opportunity for students to engage in international travel independently, without the

accompaniment of family members. This period presents a distinct opportunity for individuals to delve into their surroundings, their convictions, and their own personal identities. Given that identities are shaped by social and cultural factors engaging in international studies provides students with a unique chance to critically evaluate their own sense of self within the context of a different cultural milieu. Students, encompassing individuals who identify as transgender and gender expansive (GMI), have the potential to encounter novel experiences and expressions of gender [1][2][3][4].

The National Center for Transgender Equality identifies a group of individuals whose gender doesn't align with their assigned sex at birth. While acknowledging the significant contributions of transgender and gender-expansive individuals to society, it's crucial to recognize the adversity they often face. Unfortunately, this community is increasingly targeted by hate crimes, with a noticeable surge in incidents specifically aimed at them. Some U.S. states are even pursuing legislation seen as discriminatory against LGBTQ+ individuals. Disturbingly, statistics from the FBI for 2021 indicate that 19% of reported hate crimes in the U.S. were directed at LGBTQIA+ communities. Tragically, the Human Rights Campaign documented at least 34 homicides involving transgender and gender-expansive individuals in the U.S. in 2022. Shockingly, there are currently 492 active bills in the U.S., according to the American Civil Liberties Union, specifically targeting the LGBTQIA+ community. Scholarly discussions commonly assert that the enactment of such legislation has harmful effects [5].

The concept of minority stress suggests that individuals from marginalized groups undergo unique forms of suffering due to societal treatment of their marginalized identities. This stress can be categorized into distal (external) and proximal (internal) stressors. For GMI individuals, prevalent distal stressors encompass violence, rejection, difficulties obtaining legal documents and medical care, challenges accessing safe restroom facilities, and instances of non-affirmation or misgendering. The U.S. Trans Survey, the most extensive survey on the transgender population in the United States, highlights the myriad challenges faced by transgender individuals. Findings from this study revealed significant risks associated with openly identifying as GMI in public spaces in the U.S. Out of approximately 27,000 respondents, nearly 48% reported facing discrimination, harassment, or physical assaults linked directly to their GMI identities within the previous year. Certain environments, such as public transit, airport security, and bathrooms, pose heightened risks for these individuals. [6]. Furthermore, despite colleges and universities being commonly perceived as spaces fostering personal growth and safety, they sadly also witness acts of violence against transgender and gender-expansive individuals. Findings from the U.S. Trans Survey (USTS) revealed that a significant portion of respondents openly identifying as transgender within educational institutions faced verbal, physical, or sexual harassment or violence, with approximately 24% reporting such experiences. This mistreatment is notably higher among GMI students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. In the United States, transgender and gender-expansive individuals regularly confront harmful societal narratives that depict their identities as disordered, anticipating violence and fostering unwelcoming public environments. Consequently, it becomes challenging for transgender individuals to resist internalizing these pervasive messages. Proximal stressors, stemming from distal stressors, involve internalized transphobia, fears of discrimination, rejection, violence, identity concealment, and gender dysphoria. This internalization process impedes these individuals' access to resilience factors that could mitigate the adverse effects of minority stress on their mental health. For example, when transgender or gender-expansive individuals deliberately conceal their personal information for safety, they might refrain from connecting with others within the GMI community. Additionally, those grappling with internalized transphobia may struggle to embrace pride in their own gender identity. The presence of both distal and proximal minority stressors significantly impacts mental health and

overall well-being, leading to psychological distress and an increased risk of suicide [7][8][9][10][11].

The process of developing a transgender identity:

In addition to minority stressors, several factors can help mitigate their adverse effects and foster resilience among individuals identifying as GMI. These factors encompass acceptance, pride in one's identity, and a sense of closeness, solidarity, and cohesion within the community. Before establishing a sense of pride and belonging within the GMI community, individuals typically navigate a complex journey of identity formation. Findings from the (USTS) highlighted that a majority, around 60% of participants, sensed divergence from their assigned gender before the age of 10. The majority disclosed their GMI identity between the ages of 16 and 30, initiating various forms of transition—social, physical, and/or medical—usually occurring between 18 and 34. Empirical evidence indicates that significant milestones in gender transition often happen during emerging adulthood. This phase coincides with the period when study-abroad experiences frequently occur. Hence, students engaging in study abroad programs may encounter substantial aspects of their identity development, exploration, and transition while overseas [12].

The process of developing a GMI identity often involves several significant milestones, although these milestones may not be universally shared. These stages include childhood gender nonconformity, personal experiences of gender incongruence, the presence of gender dysphoria, the gradual self-realization of one's gender identity, and the eventual public acknowledgment and identification as GMI. While coming out as transgender or gender-expansive can bring about improved psychological well-being, validation, and a sense of community, it's crucial to recognize that this act can also expose individuals to potential dangers and threats due to external stressors associated with minority status. It's essential to note that the processes of identity formation and disclosure for GMI individuals can exhibit traits of continuity and nonlinearity. This means that these processes aren't always straightforward or uniform, and individuals may experience them in diverse ways and timelines. [13]. Coming out often involves a cyclical process, as individuals navigate unique dynamics of trust, boundaries, and safety within each personal relationship. The (USTS) revealed that a relatively low number of transgender and gender-expansive (GMI) individuals have either fully revealed or entirely concealed their gender identities to everyone in their social circles. In contrast, a significant proportion of participants had disclosed their sexual orientation to a select few or a majority of people within their social circles. This highlights the intricate and nuanced nature of coming out, where individuals make choices about disclosure based on various personal considerations within different relationships [14].

The construction of gender involves individuals understanding their own gender identity by comparing experiences with others and assimilating dominant societal narratives. Study abroad experiences offer students a chance to explore and shape their identities by immersing themselves in diverse cultural settings, integrating these encounters into their existing self-perceptions. This study investigates how master and alternative narratives influence the formation of gendered beliefs, attitudes, and biases. Cisnormativity is a prevailing societal narrative presuming that everyone is inherently cisgender, aligning with their assigned sex at birth. Trans normativity, on the other hand, seeks to establish the normalcy of certain transgender individuals who conform to the gender binary, adopt conventional roles, have undergone medical transitioning, identify as transgender since childhood, and face adversity due to their transgender status. However, this narrative marginalizes other transgender individuals, labeling them as not authentically transgender. Alongside personal identity development, the formation of transgender and gender-expansive (GMI) identities involve navigating both cisnormativity and trans normativity. This process aims to shape personal gender narratives that either conform to or challenge these dominant societal norms [15][16].

Absolutely, the diverse GMI communities encompass a multitude of identities, including racial, ethnic, disability, class, and sexual orientations. Understanding the interplay between gender construction and these diverse social identities is crucial. Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw in 1989, emphasizes the interconnectedness of an individual's various social identities and the social structures that shape their experiences. These social identities don't just exist separately; they intersect, creating intricate and multifaceted human experiences. For instance, the lived experience of a transfeminine person who identifies as White is shaped by both their gender and race, involving the effects of cisnormativity and White supremacy. These intersecting identities contribute to a unique and singular experience where gender and race intersect, forming a distinct perspective. The interactions between race, gender, and other facets of their identity aren't merely additive; rather, their White racial identity is molded in connection with and influenced by their transfeminine identity, and vice versa. Every individual experience a complex interplay between their socially advantaged and disadvantaged identities within the cultural and social structures surrounding them. This intersectionality highlights the nuanced and intricate nature of personal experiences shaped by multiple identities interacting simultaneously [17].

Research on Study Abroad Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Individuals:

In the context of this research, "study abroad" refers to the educational opportunities pursued by United States-based undergraduate students in foreign countries. Currently, there's a significant lack of research focusing on the experiences of students with GMI identities during their participation in this study abroad program. Previous studies examining LGBTQIA+ student participation in study abroad programs indicated a potential inclination for LGBTQIA+ students to partake in these opportunities compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. However, these studies also highlighted a noticeable oversight by many colleges and universities, as they often fail to include LGBTQIA+ groups in their targeted outreach efforts for demographic-specific study abroad programs. Moreover, when study abroad outreach and resources do consider LGBTQIA+ students, they tend to superficially accommodate transgender and gender-expansive (GMI) students without adequately addressing their unique needs. This highlights a crucial gap in addressing the specific challenges and requirements of GMI students participating in study abroad experiences [18].

Literature Review:

Numerous scholars have emphasized the need for in-depth exploration into various aspects concerning LGBTQIA+ study abroad students, specifically highlighting the experiences of transgender and gender-expansive individuals. There's a call for investigations delving into safety concerns, disclosure of identity, intersectional identities, community dynamics, and experiences of sexual violence within the context of LGBTQIA+ students participating in study abroad programs. Furthermore, scholars advocate for comprehensive studies examining the development of identity among students engaged in studying abroad across diverse international settings and durations. Additionally, there's a specific recommendation for future investigations to prioritize the interests and concerns of LGBTQIA+ students, particularly those identifying as transgender or gender expansive, within the framework of studying abroad. This recommendation underscores the importance of addressing the specific needs and experiences of these individuals to ensure more inclusive and supportive study-abroad environments [19].

In a prior study, two current members of the research team and a former colleague conducted a pilot study exploring the study-abroad experiences of three transgender and gender-expansive students. Despite the small sample size, the findings provided valuable insights. The students actively engaged in contemplating their gender and other identities while adjusting to an unfamiliar cultural setting. Their discussions highlighted the experience of personal growth and transformations related to their gender identity and expression following their participation in a study abroad program. The participants shared their increased understanding of the norms

and boundaries related to gender roles within the cultural context of their host country [20]. In an initial study conducted by two current researchers and a former colleague, three transgender and gender-expansive students shared their transformative experiences while studying abroad. Despite the small sample size, these students actively navigated their gender identities within new cultural contexts, gaining insights into gender norms and facing external scrutiny at times. They emphasized the invaluable support provided by the LGBT community and chosen families while abroad. However, the study also highlighted a lack of preparedness and institutional support, as each participant encountered instances of sexual harassment or violence, instilling a sense of caution regarding potential future incidents. These preliminary findings prompted the need for a more comprehensive investigation [21]. The current study aims to deepen the understanding of transgender and gender-expansive individuals' experiences in study abroad programs. Building upon the initial study, this research seeks to fill existing gaps by employing a larger sample size and a more rigorous methodology. It aims to explore two central inquiries: how these individuals interpret their study abroad experiences throughout their undergraduate education and what their gender and cultural experiences entail within these programs. This investigation delves into the influence of cultural values on the treatment of gender minority communities across different nations, shedding light on the experiences of GMI students and revealing cultural variations [22]. Unlike a singular focus on a specific location, the study aims for a comprehensive understanding of GMI students' study abroad encounters within a broader context. Employing a standardized approach, the research methodology involves an in-depth examination of materials and methods used in the study, striving to offer comprehensive insights into the experiences of transgender and gender-expansive individuals during study abroad programs.

In this section, let's delve into the research team involved in the data collection process. The team comprised five members from diverse college backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 20 to 44 years old. Two members identified as gender expansive, while the remaining individuals identified as cisgender women. In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, three team members self-identified as White, one as Black, and one as Asian American. In early 2021, one team member, identified as White and nonbinary, left the team due to scheduling conflicts [23]. Subsequently, another team member, identified as a White cisgender woman, joined for the remaining duration of the study. The lead investigator, also the first author, was a graduate student guided by a university faculty member, listed as the last author. Three team members had backgrounds in psychology and anthropology from their undergraduate studies. During the data analysis, there were changes in the university affiliations of some team members. All team members underwent training on conducting research with GMI populations, facilitated by the first author. Additionally, the fifth author, acting as the project's auditor and an expert in Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), conducted a training session specifically focusing on CQR methodology [24].

The research team initiated and maintained discussions, both formal and informal, throughout the research process, addressing their personal experiences and potential biases. They acknowledged several influential factors that could shape their perspectives on the collected data. These factors encompass participation in a pilot study, individual gender and racial identities, personal experiences in studying and teaching abroad, as well as the power dynamics existing within the team, including age, racial identity, lived experiences, and professional backgrounds. Discussions also encompassed any prior or ongoing dual relationships, such as those between professors and students. These open discussions fostered an environment of transparent recognition among team members regarding the potential impact of their own backgrounds on their interpretations of interview data and the coding process. To maintain objectivity during data analysis, the researchers consciously set aside their personal experiences and biases while striving to reach consensus and conducting audits. Ethical

considerations remained a cornerstone throughout the academic inquiry. The team continually examined and evaluated the moral implications of their research endeavors, ensuring a conscientious approach to their study [25].

The present investigation received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Webster University. Given the historical exploitation experienced by GMI individuals in research, our commitment was to conduct thoughtful and reflective research. Throughout the process, we actively engaged in discussions and utilized pertinent resources to address ethical concerns associated with GMI research. Our goal was to ensure that data collection, analysis, and dissemination processes accurately represented a diverse range of GMI narratives, avoiding perpetuating harmful dynamics between researchers and GMI individuals. Led by a gender-expansive researcher as the first author, this information was transparently communicated to potential participants in recruitment materials to prioritize their safety. Participants provided written informed consent through an online survey, supplemented by verbal consent before each interview. Equitable compensation was essential to acknowledge participants' temporal, physical, and emotional investments. They received $40 worth of purchases from an online retailer of their choice as remuneration [26].

Methodology:

Study Design:

This study employed a qualitative approach using focus groups, with data analyzed through thematic analysis as per [25]. Thematic analysis aids in identifying patterns within data without requiring a specific theoretical framework, offering flexibility while ensuring accuracy and reliability [27].

Research Team:

The team comprised individuals aged 20 to 35, diverse in academic backgrounds and personal identities. Two members identified as transgender or gender expansive. Discussions on identities and biases were conducted before data collection and analysis, ensuring sensitivity and inclusivity.

Data Collection:

Participants completed a demographic form detailing their personal information before the focus group. The focus group, facilitated by team members familiar with gender diversity, was audio-recorded and lasted 50 minutes. Follow-up interviews occurred one to two weeks later, aiming to delve deeper into participants' experiences. Transcripts were reviewed by participants to ensure accuracy and autonomy over their narratives. The interviews, conducted by the first author, followed a semi-structured format with 14 core questions and potential prompts. This methodology was developed after an extensive review of the limited literature on LGBTQIA+ individuals' study-abroad experiences, including insights from a pilot study conducted by [22]. Questions focused on participants' pre-departure preparations, experiences related to identity, relationships, safety, personal growth during their study abroad, and advice for prospective students. The interview methodology was tested and refined based on feedback from two transgender and gender-expansive individuals with prior study-abroad experience. Participants received the interview protocol via email beforehand for familiarity. Interviews adhered to CQR guidelines to ensure participant anonymity when discussing sensitive topics related to marginalized identities. They were conducted either via phone or Zoom with cameras turned off. While all participants were asked identical open-ended questions, the interviewer encouraged detailed responses and posed personalized follow-up questions as appropriate. Interview durations varied from 27 to 60 minutes, averaging at 47 minutes. The process of gathering and converting information into usable data is commonly termed as recording and data transformation [28].

The Utilization of Data Analytic Strategies:

The data underwent analysis using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach, involving all authors except the fifth, who served as the auditor. The team actively participated in every stage of CQR through weekly group meetings and assigned tasks between sessions. Coding activities were undertaken collaboratively with a minimum of three authors present, typically involving four to five members. CQR's strength lies in its ability to address biases, which our team consistently prioritized throughout the study. We emphasized a collaborative and intellectually stimulating approach, aiming to scrutinize assumptions and coding choices. To address the complexity of the data, we established a horizontal organizational structure, rotated coding responsibilities, discussed biases openly, conducted regular check-ins to assess interpretations, evaluated interview transcripts for validity, and fostered an environment conducive to diverse viewpoints. These efforts were aimed at ensuring rigor and reducing potential biases in our analysis [29].

The study team meticulously analyzed the transcripts, initially compiling domains that evolved through multiple revisions to ensure accuracy and completeness. These foundational concepts underwent scrutiny by an auditor for verification and clarity. Through cross-analysis, the team formulated categories and subcategories corresponding to each area, validating their relevance and inclusiveness in coding the data. While each participant contributed unique experiences, recurring patterns, and themes emerged during the data analysis. Notably, the majority of new categories and subcategories surfaced within the initial two-thirds of instances, indicating saturation in the data. The auditor reviewed the final categories and subcategories to ensure thoroughness. In contrast to typical CQR practices involving qualitative software for data organization, our team opted against it. This deliberate choice allowed us to maintain close engagement with the data throughout the analysis process [30].

The Comprehensive Qualitative Research approach necessitates the inclusion of frequency data pertaining to domains, categories, and subcategories. This reporting is crucial in order to ascertain the degree to which the identified themes accurately reflect the experiences of the sample. The classification of domains, categories, and subcategories is determined based on the number of participants who endorse them. Specifically, those approved by 14 or 15 participants are categorized as General, while those endorsed by 8 to 13 participants are classified as Typical. Domains, categories, and subcategories endorsed by 2 to 7 participants are labeled as variants. However, those endorsed by only one person are not included in the report. argue that the presence of General and Typical categories serves as further evidence that saturation has been achieved.

Findings:

The analysis of data revealed seven domains, each containing categories and subcategories. This paper aims to delve into two of these domains from a broader study. These specific domains are crucial in understanding how gender and social identities are shaped during study abroad experiences. The first domain centers on self-reflection and personal development, while the second focuses on relationships, community understanding, and interactions with others. Upon exploring the identity and personal growth domain, one is prompted to consider the factors influencing their self-evolution. This domain encompasses delving into individuality, including values, beliefs, attitudes, and self-cultivation. It specifically covers the dynamic experiences of participants in study abroad programs, focusing on their diverse identities and interactions with others. Participants discussed decisions about revealing their identities, experiences of visibility or invisibility, empowerment or disempowerment, and feelings of safety or vulnerability. They also explored how identities can shift and strategies for navigating gender and overlapping identities. For instance, an individual identifying as obese, transfeminine, and Latinx shared encounters with intersectional discrimination in pursuing relationships with queer men. This discrimination included fatphobia, femme-phobia, and transphobia. Some individuals altered their gender presentation to appear more masculine for safety reasons in certain

environments, conserving their energy and ensuring personal safety. The participants shared profound intrapersonal insights and experiences of personal growth stemming from their study abroad encounters. One participant particularly highlighted the cultivation of self-acceptance as a central facet of their personal development while studying abroad. These individuals discussed how their overseas experiences allowed for an exploration of their identity without preconceived notions, fostering a more genuine, sociable, and resilient self upon their return to the United States. The analysis revealed five distinct themes, including categories, subcategories, and their corresponding frequencies. The first identified theme centers on the factors influencing individuals' decisions to disclose personal identity information. It encompasses the multifaceted decision-making process participants underwent regarding the disclosure of their identities. They discussed factors such as timing, necessity, manner, and intended recipients for such disclosures. Conversations also delved into strategies for communicating gender, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity. Some felt empowered in making these choices, while others felt a lack of autonomy influenced by variables like physical appearance. The visibility of their identities often influenced their agency in disclosure; while some found solace and validation, others faced concerns about potential harm resulting from inadvertent disclosure.

Participants also highlighted how outward manifestations of identity were perceived differently in various cultural contexts. For instance, one participant noted that their queer sexuality was apparent while their gender identity remained concealed during their time overseas, allowing them deliberate control over disclosing their trans status based on the context and audience. Participant 8 articulated their strategy of maintaining their genuine identity while refraining from openly revealing their transgender status in public spaces. Despite embodying traits often associated with homosexuality, they observed a common perception of being viewed as a masculine lesbian, a perception not aligned with their actual identity. Consequently, this perceived image influences how others interact with them. They usually lack visible cues about their personal information, which leads to a lack of acknowledgment or perception as a transgender or genderfluid individual by most people. The participants collectively emphasized the pivotal role of trust in disclosing elements of their identities. Evaluating trust and security in interpersonal connections significantly shaped their decisions on when, how, and to what extent they disclosed their identities. Academic environments fostering supportive professors or social settings with understanding peers were noted as spaces where trust and safety allowed for open discussions about gender, sexuality, or disability identities. One participant highlighted their discernment in disclosure, choosing to share their sexual orientation but refraining from disclosing their non-binary gender due to uncertainties about their host mother's potential reaction. Participants shared diverse perspectives on the challenges of identity disclosure abroad, distinct from those faced in the United States. Language proficiency was a significant factor, enabling one participant to comfortably disclose their non-binary status after gaining fluency. However, cultural nuances posed challenges in making disclosure decisions. Some participants felt compelled to assimilate for safety reasons, hesitating to stand out further. Differing perspectives on identity in the host country influenced disclosure decisions, with one participant emphasizing the uniqueness of their experiences as nonbinary lesbians of Black American descent compared to Western media portrayals.

The Influence of Context on Identity Salience:

This category delves into the contextual factors that impact how individuals perceive the salience of their identity. Identity salience refers to the prominence or significance of one's identity within different contexts. Participants articulated the intricate interconnections between their various identities within broader societal frameworks. One participant emphasized the integral connection between their gender and sexual identities while studying abroad, recognizing their queer identity as a unified combination of being non-binary and gay. They expressed that articulating their queer identity inherently conveys both their sexual orientation

and gender identity. The communication of identity salience was observed in participants' choices of personal identities highlighted during interviews. These encompassed various demographic characteristics like gender identity, race/ethnicity, disability status, chronic illnesses, socioeconomic class, and more. Participants also shared descriptors related to their self-perception, revealing attributes such as being passionate, introverted, or creative. They discussed how external factors like visibility, environment, activities, and interactions influenced the fluctuation of their identities. For instance, one participant highlighted the significance of their legal blindness during their study abroad experience, which significantly affected their ability to navigate the environment.

Another participant, of Mexican American descent and identifying as transgender with legal blindness, stressed the consistent prominence of these identities, particularly due to active participation in student politics. Participants discussed the significance of their transgender identity within their social circles, particularly in conversations regarding internationalism. Another participant reflected on the transformation of their racial, gender, and sexual identities while studying abroad in a country predominantly inhabited by people of Black descent. They noted the shift in emphasis on their racial identity compared to their experiences in the United States, where their racial background often took precedence due to prevalent racial dynamics. In their host country, however, the focus shifted more towards their lesbian and non-binary identities rather than their racial background. This shift led to feelings of marginalization based on gender and sexual orientation, while experiencing inclusion based on racial identity, delineating the varied impact of different identities in different contexts.

This category explores the contextual factors influencing the significance of individuals' identities, known as identity salience. It pertains to how prominently an identity resonates within diverse settings. Participants detailed the intricate intersections of their various identities within broader societal contexts. For example, one participant highlighted the interconnectedness of their gender and sexual identities while studying abroad, seeing their queer identity as a cohesive blend of being non-binary and gay, conveying both sexual orientation and gender identity. The manifestation of identity salience was evident in participants' choices when discussing personal characteristics, including gender, race, disability, health conditions, socioeconomic status, and personal traits like passion or introversion. They discussed how external factors such as visibility, surroundings, activities, and interactions influenced the prominence of these identities. For instance, a participant emphasized the impact of their legal blindness during their study abroad experience, significantly affecting their navigation abilities. Another participant, identifying as Mexican American, transgender, and legally blind, emphasized the consistent visibility of these identities, notably due to their active role in student politics.

Participants also highlighted the significance of their transgender identity in social circles, especially regarding international conversations. Furthermore, a participant reflected on the shifts in their racial, gender, and sexual identities while studying in a country predominantly inhabited by Black individuals. They observed a shift in emphasis from their racial identity, commonly significant in the United States, to a focus on their lesbian and non-binary identities in the host country. This change resulted in feelings of marginalization regarding gender and sexual orientation, while their racial identity contributed to feelings of inclusion, illustrating the varying impacts of different identities across different settings.

Development and Transformative Experiences Abroad:

The section receiving broad support encapsulates participant perspectives on personal growth stemming from their study abroad encounters. Some viewed identity shifts and personal development as deliberate choices, while others deemed them necessary adaptations to new environments. Many participants expressed empowerment in advocating for themselves as transgender or gender-expansive individuals' post-study abroad. One participant noted newfound recognition of pervasive anti-Black and transphobic violence abroad. Despite the

disheartening acknowledgment, this realization fueled a desire for further travel, emphasizing the power of choice in navigating challenging circumstances. This category underscores the interconnected nature of individual growth resulting from study abroad experiences. While gender influenced certain growth instances, participants also reported independent advancements. These included enhanced independence, empathy, self-efficacy, social awareness, environmental consciousness, and resilience. Some acknowledged unmet needs and took action to address them. Exploring challenging situations also deepened their appreciation for life in the United States. Regarding perceptions of bodies and identities, participants anticipated potential harm due to their marginalized identities, expressing insecurity, vigilance, and fear.

They felt constrained in various activities, including intimate relationships, solo travel, nightlife socializing, clothing expression, and restroom use. Some participants perceived cisgender individuals as experiencing greater liberation due to less mental and emotional energy devoted to personal safety concerns. Participants recounted instances of injury to their identities and physical well-being during their study abroad. These ranged from sexual assault, mistreatment, objectification, and misgendering, to social exclusion and discrimination. Gender influenced personal experiences, amplifying vulnerability and societal pressures. There were limited introspective discussions on managing gender dysphoria. Identity disclosure choices had significant consequences, impacting authenticity, connections with others, and professional fulfillment. Disclosure facilitated a sense of presence and assertion among transgender and gender-expansive students. Concerning identity disclosures, participants experienced varied outcomes. Some found affirmation abroad for their nonbinary identities, while others delayed disclosure. Positive outcomes included authenticity, comfort, and connection, while negative repercussions involved unease, safety concerns, and detachment. Instances of rejection upon disclosure impacted familial and social bonds significantly. This comprehensive section reflects diverse growth, challenges, and consequences experienced by participants during their study abroad, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of personal development and identity navigation in different cultural landscapes.

This section highlights the diversity of encounters, ranging from empowerment and independent growth to the constraints and vulnerabilities felt due to marginalized identities. It touches upon the recognition of pervasive violence abroad and its impact on participants' desires for further exploration. Participants experienced both interconnected and independent growth, influenced by gender but also manifesting in enhanced independence, empathy, social awareness, and resilience. Despite personal advancements, there were instances of anticipated harm due to marginalized identities, leading to constraints in various activities and heightened feelings of insecurity and fear. The section also details the range of injuries participants faced concerning their identities and physical well-being, from mistreatment to discrimination, with gender notably shaping these experiences and amplifying societal pressures. However, it notes limited discussions on managing gender dysphoria within the study-abroad context.

Identity disclosure played a pivotal role, impacting authenticity, connections with others, and professional fulfillment. Some participants found affirmation and positive outcomes through disclosures, while others experienced unease, safety concerns, and detachment, even facing rejection that significantly impacted their familial and social bonds. Overall, this comprehensive section presents a rich tapestry of experiences, illuminating the intricate nature of personal development and identity navigation in diverse cultural settings encountered during study abroad programs. The section focuses on the impact of interpersonal connections, or their absence, during participants' study abroad experiences. It showcases the significance of relationships in providing support, validation, appreciation, and understanding of their identities. Positive interactions included instances of unwavering support, advocacy against discrimination, and various forms of assistance, ranging from emotional to physical aid. However, it's important to note that participants also recounted numerous adverse

encounters linked to their appearance and identities, leading to feelings of exclusion, emotional distress, and fatigue. Negative interactions varied from intimate partner violence to discrimination and harassment, causing emotional strain and a sense of disconnection. Participants expressed frustration and exhaustion in repeatedly explaining their identity and dressing choices when faced with intrusive inquiries from the local community. Despite these challenges, participants often experienced positive emotions and meaningful connections. Engaging in enjoyable activities, heartfelt conversations, developing strong emotional bonds, forming romantic relationships, and encountering supportive individuals fostered optimism and a sense of unity. Witnessing supportive healthcare environments abroad also brought hope and validation to some participants. In exploring modes of social interaction, the study delved into various approaches participants used when engaging with others. It highlighted diverse interpersonal engagements within academic settings, including connections with American and international students, faculty, study abroad alumni, LGBTQIA+ organizations, and professionals in their fields of interest. For instance, one participant found comfort and support in a relationship with a professor who understood and respected their gender identity, creating a safe space for expression within the classroom.

The participants predominantly discussed their social interactions within recreational settings during their study abroad experiences, engaging in activities like camping, hiking, communal meals, artistic endeavors, attending pride events, getting tattoos, spending nights with friends, and visiting clubs. While some encountered favorable experiences, others faced challenges. One participant recounted a distressing incident of sexual harassment at a nightclub in a foreign country, describing unwelcome advances and groping. Their experiences with romantic and sexual partners varied widely, ranging from using dating apps, consensual encounters, and intimate partner violence, to dealing with relationship endings. The living arrangements significantly influenced their connections; some felt a strong bond with international students due to shared political liberalism, while others faced misgendering and objectification in communal settings. Participants engaged in political and social justice endeavors, experiencing a mix of emotions from worry to empowerment.

Engaging in protests fostered feelings of solidarity within the LGBTQIA+ community, as they witnessed others fearlessly challenging societal norms. In the realm of interpersonal relationships, disclosure of gender identity played a pivotal role. Participants found trust and intimacy shaped by their choices in revealing their transgender or gender-expansive identity. Some indirectly revealed their identities through symbols like the trans flag, leading to meaningful connections and shared experiences. They often connected swiftly with fellow queer and transgender individuals abroad, finding shared identities accelerated relationship-building. Intersectionality, encompassing various identities like race and gender, influenced their interactions and relationships. Participants highlighted the importance of spaces that acknowledged and embraced their intersecting oppressed identities. The temporary nature of study abroad programs posed challenges in establishing enduring relationships. Some felt limited in discussing identity matters due to short stays, adopting cautious approaches in these conversations.

The experiences of participants forming relationships while studying abroad were impacted by their family backgrounds. For instance, one participant's past experiences of transphobia within their family influenced their ability to trust and connect with others in a foreign country. Another participant received valuable assistance from a family member who traveled to the host nation, aiding in their adjustment during the initial weeks abroad. This research focused on 15 transgender and gender-expansive individuals from the United States participating in an undergraduate study abroad program. Identity exploration,

personal development, and building interpersonal connections were significant aspects of their overseas experiences. Gender and other identities shaped various facets of their experiences, including interactions with new cultures, academic growth, relationship formation, and community bonding. Participants invested time and effort in contemplating whether to disclose their identities abroad, considering factors like appearance, trust in relationships, language barriers, and cultural differences. The act of publicly identifying as transgender or gender-expansive was seen as a pivotal milestone in their identity development, often influenced by specific relationships rather than a universal decision. All participants navigated and valued their gender identities while considering intersecting identities like race, sexuality, ability, and body size.

The salience of different identities fluctuated in diverse contexts, influenced by factors like visibility and privilege. Surprisingly, half the participants emphasized their socially privileged identities during their time abroad, realizing shifts in privilege and marginalization within new cultural contexts. Participants reported transformational experiences during their study abroad, from identity progress to internal growth like independence and patience. Despite encountering distressing situations, they expressed personal development and a willingness to undertake study abroad again, aligning with prior studies on personal growth during international experiences. However, most participants encountered expected or actual harm and challenges related to gender dysphoria while abroad. This indicates experiences of minority stressors, showing the weight of potential harm even for those who did not face mental or physical trauma directly. Empirical evidence supports the fear of harm associated with being transgender or gender-expansive, aligning with existing research indicating higher rates of discrimination, harassment, and violence faced by these individuals in various contexts, including study abroad programs. The study faces limitations in sample size and qualitative analysis, but it highlights the prevalence of violence and harm among transgender and gender-expansive individuals studying abroad, emphasizing the need for targeted precautionary measures for these students. Gender dysphoria, a proximal minority stressor commonly experienced by transgender and gender-expansive individuals, plays a significant role in the developmental journey of establishing a transgender identity. Surprisingly, only two participants explicitly mentioned gender dysphoria, despite its acknowledged importance in the lived experiences of transgender individuals. Many recounted situations where their gender identity conflicted with their outward appearance or other facets of their identity, often seen as manifestations of distal minority stress and interpersonal harm.

While only two reported internalizing such experiences as gender dysphoria, it's possible that other participants underwent similar internal struggles without articulating them. Due to the research methodology's non-interpretative approach, the study refrained from attributing the experience of gender dysphoria to participants who didn't explicitly use this term. Regarding divulging information, nine participants highlighted the positive outcomes of disclosure, while seven discussed its negative consequences. In contrast, four participants shared negative outcomes associated with not disclosing, and two emphasized positive aspects of nondisclosure. Concealing one's identity, especially for transgender and gender-expansive individuals, is recognized as a form of proximal minority stress due to past or anticipated harm in openly expressing one's identity. This stress can lead to significant psychological distress, particularly in a society where transgender individuals frequently face violence and risks associated with revealing their identity. Despite cultural narratives emphasizing the importance of coming out, some individuals choose not to disclose their identity for various reasons. The participants' experiences showcased a range of positive and negative outcomes associated with disclosure or concealment, influenced by individual priorities and safety concerns. The study participants detailed the process of

forming interpersonal connections, understanding social groups, and engaging in social exchanges. These relationships were found to significantly impact their well-being, providing experiences of joy, connection, solidarity, and love. For transgender and gender-expansive individuals, community support is crucial in alleviating anxiety and mental health challenges associated with gender minority pressures. While studying abroad, these individuals encounter stressors linked to their gender identity, including harassment and violence, alongside challenges common to all students.

Establishing connections with similar-gendered individuals during international education serves as a valuable resource for processing identity-related events. Building relationships with other transgender and LGBTQIA+ individuals in study abroad programs enhance a sense of transnational unity and support within the global trans and queer community. While these relationships offered support and affirmation, nearly all participants encountered negative relational encounters abroad, involving both heterosexual, cisgender individuals and those identifying as queer or transgender and gender expansive. Despite the potential of community support, interpersonal interactions within identity groups can also manifest distant stressors like discrimination and violence. This dual nature of community interactions highlights their complexity and their role in both supporting and potentially causing distress among transgender and gender-expansive study-abroad students. The participants engaged in relationships across various settings and activities while overseas, including academics, recreation, romance, living situations, political engagement, and social justice initiatives. Notably, some participants reported instances of interpersonal injury and violence, especially in nightlife contexts, underscoring the multifaceted nature of their experiences during their international studies.

The participants unanimously agreed that shared identities played a pivotal role in building relationships abroad, fostering a quicker sense of closeness. Many stressed the importance of communal experiences among transgender and gender-expansive individuals during study abroad programs. However, not all participants sought connections within this specific identity group. For some, shared ethnicity held more significance than gender identity. The participants delved into the concept of intersectionality, exploring its role in shaping relationships and interpersonal dynamics. Intersectionality theory, integrating with minority stress theory, highlights that individual with multiple marginalized identities are disproportionately vulnerable to stigma, ostracization, and inequity. While research on transgender and gender-expansive individuals of color is limited, interviews revealed factors contributing to resilience, including embracing racial/ethnic and gender identities, connecting with activist groups, and nurturing hope for the future. Participants' experiences echoed scholarly investigations showing diverse needs, aspirations, and concerns among transgender and gender-expansive individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. One participant found validation in engaging with a trans community abroad, while another believed another trans person's presence wouldn't have altered their experiences due to prior discrimination from binary trans individuals.

Another participant's apprehensions about safety stemmed from the intersection of racial, gender, and sexual identities. Ensuring the safety of queer and nonbinary individuals involves multifaceted measures, encompassing education, policy changes, community support, and creating inclusive environments. These measures aim to address discrimination, foster understanding, and provide resources for marginalized groups. The implications of these findings are far-reaching. Students and their families, particularly those identifying as transgender, gender non-conforming, or queer, can benefit from considering these insights for future study-abroad experiences. Psychotherapists working in educational settings can help students navigate and understand their international experiences effectively. Educational institutions and organizations organizing study abroad programs

have a responsibility to enhance students' welfare, especially for transgender and gender-expansive students facing societal discrimination. This study proposes specific recommendations to improve study abroad programs, aiming to create more inclusive and supportive environments for marginalized students.

Suggestions for Study Abroad Interventions:

The study identifies shortcomings in the study-abroad experiences of transgender and gender-expansive individuals, prompting universities, organizations, and study programs to take effective action. Given the prevalence of harm and violence in this research and prior studies, it's crucial to implement tangible strategies protecting GMI students from emotional, physical, and sexual violence, especially in leisure settings like nightlife. This includes comprehensive instruction on prevalent risks, self-protection strategies, and clear guidelines for seeking assistance and reporting harm. Study abroad programs can highlight the value of relationship-building, a significant component of the experience. Providing tools to integrate GMI individuals into local communities is vital. This involves not only access to LGBTQIA+ communities but also communities aligned with their intersecting identities, like Black or disability-focused groups. Developing study abroad programs conducive to GMI students involves increasing the inclusion of marginalized identities among students, faculty, and the curriculum. Engaging GMI students in advocacy and activism initiatives fosters belonging and enhances their well-being abroad. Recognizing that studying abroad is a period of personal growth, identity exploration, knowledge acquisition, relationship-building, and occasional interpersonal challenges, programs should create or improve avenues for students to reflect on their experiences. Incorporating reflection projects or facilitating discussions during and after the study abroad period helps students make sense of their experiences. Establishing comprehensive protocols for GMI students in transnational global education programs ensures explicit guidance on accessing mental healthcare services during and after their time abroad, offering therapeutic support to process their experiences.

Suggestions for Future Research:

This study highlights various potential research paths crucial for the well-being of transgender and gender-expansive individuals. Future research employing mixed-methods approaches should delve into the experiences of GMI students in international study programs, exploring their higher inclination towards participation. Exploring the challenges faced by GMI students living and studying in the United States or other popular destination countries and examining disclosure choices in study abroad or leisure travel settings on a global scale would be beneficial. Further investigation into how GMI individuals comprehend their intersecting identities across cultures, considering privilege's influence, is essential. Future research focusing on effective strategies ensuring the physical safety of GMI students abroad and longitudinal studies examining long-term effects of harm are recommended. Understanding the community's dual role as both stress and resilience for GMI individuals across settings is crucial. Continuing research on how GMI individuals establish and define community is advised, considering their diverse interpretations influenced by their identities and needs. This research employed a qualitative, exploratory approach, delving into the narratives of 15 GMI students. While it aimed for a comprehensive examination across study abroad destinations rather than within a single location, there's a bias toward European countries in the sample. Additionally, the study predominantly represents early twenties individuals, limiting insights into older or non-traditional students' experiences. In conclusion, studying abroad offers valuable opportunities for self-exploration and global understanding. For GMI students, it provides a space for personal growth and a sense of belonging. The participants grappled with identity, community, disclosure choices, positive communal experiences,

and negative interpersonal encounters. Understanding these complexities is vital for ensuring the safety, well-being, and growth of GMI students abroad.

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