“Canada-Here”: A Narrative Inquiry into Queer International Students’ Experiences in Small-City Ontario

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how queer international students negotiate postsecondary education, everyday life, and belonging in small Ontario cities where visibility is heightened, resources can be thin, and "inclusion" is unevenly lived. Grounded in the researcher's positionality as a queer international student, the study is guided by three research questions: How does queerness shape participants' educational experiences and daily lives?; What institutional and community supports and barriers do they encounter?; and, How do these conditions shape belonging and wellbeing? Drawing on a qualitative narrative inquiry, fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with queer international students living and studying in small Ontario cities. The transcripts were analysed using a thematic narrative approach. Interpretation was anchored in a combined theoretical framework of intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism, enabling analysis across structural conditions (such as racialisation, immigration status, institutional governance), everyday communicative labour (such as strategic disclosure, selective silence, embodied self-presentation), and the political economy of international education (such as market logics and uneven support provisioning). Three interrelated themes structure the findings. First, participants narrate "Canada" as an imagined refuge assembled through legal reputation and urban pride imaginaries but recalibrate their imaginings through their small-city experiences, producing a shift from "Canada" to "Canada-here." Second, belonging emerges as conditional rather than secured: participants engage in ongoing identity management through strategic (in)visibility across audiences and settings, including transnational audiences and imagined futures of going back home. Third, whiteness operates as a structuring norm across public, institutional, and queer-designated spaces, generating racialised distributions of safety and credibility and a recurring double bind in which spaces rarely hold all aspects of the

self. Across themes, the dissertation advances a central claim: rights and inclusion can be visible "on paper" and in institutional messaging, while daily life remains shaped by exposure, racialised dynamics within and beyond queer communities, uneven institutional responsiveness, and migration-related uncertainty. The study contributes conceptually by reframing queer safety as place-specific and infrastructural and practically by identifying implications for small-city postsecondary institutions, local service ecologies, and policy environments that govern international students' futures.

Keywords: queer international students; small-city Ontario, narrative inquiry, intersectionality, neoliberalism, identity management

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This dissertation is finished, but what it has given me will not end here. If the snow outside the frosted window has taught me anything, it is that the quietest things can still accumulate, flake by flake, into something that changes the whole landscape.

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Chapter 1: Frosted Windows and New Horizons: Locating Queer International Student Life in Small-City Ontario

Outside the frosted window, snow drifts down over a city centre that is not the bustle of Toronto or Vancouver but a smaller and quieter place where visibility feels both essential and precarious. In such a setting, queerness reaches beyond identity. It becomes a practice of negotiation shaped by migration, memory, and fragile forms of belonging, carried through family phone calls, contested in classroom debates, and whispered in tentative confidences among new friends. These suspended moments, where personal safety intersects with cultural obligation and the longing for community, form the terrain on which the lives of queer[1] international students in Canada unfold.

Inspired by my own life as a queer international student in Thunder Bay, Ontario, my dissertation emerges from the voices of queer international students who chart fragile, courageous paths across unfamiliar landscapes. What my participants repeatedly narrate, however, is not “Canada” as a stable national container, but “Canada-here”, a lived, local Canada that takes shape in particular small-city streets, campuses, and tight social worlds. Drawing from participants such as Ravi and Fatima, I use “Canada-here” as an analytic phrase drawn from their recurring narrative movement, the shift from Canada as an imagined refuge to Canada as experienced through the specificity of place. Such paradox is taken up in Chapter 5, where it is examined in detail under Theme 1. Through a narrative inquiry grounded in intersectionality,

[1] Throughout this dissertation, I use **queer** as an umbrella term to refer to participants whose sexual orientations and/or gender identities fall outside dominant cisgender-heterosexual norms. While longer acronyms (e.g., **2SLGBTQ+**) are common, and I use them in certain places, I adopt *queer* in my own wording as a reclaimed, deliberately non-exhaustive shorthand that can hold diverse identities without implying that any acronym can ever “complete” the community it names. Wherever possible, I prioritize participants’ own self-identifications (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, trans, non-binary). I also use **trans** as a shortened umbrella term. Although **trans*** is sometimes used to signal inclusivity, trans-led resources note the asterisk is unnecessary because *trans* already functions inclusively; I therefore use *trans* without an asterisk except when quoting sources that use *trans**
(see http://www.transstudent.org/asterisk).

neoliberalism and identity management theory, I invite readers to step into these complex contours of experience to explore not only what it means to be queer and international in small Ontario cities but how these intersecting identities shape and are shaped by education, community, and the ongoing work of becoming.

In this dissertation, I explore the lived experiences of queer international students in small Ontario cities, with particular attention to how their intersecting identities shape their academic, social, and personal lives. My goal is to illuminate the complex realities this population navigates, realities that are all too often overlooked in mainstream academic and institutional discourses. Through this introductory chapter, I lay out the framework for my dissertation, beginning with the purpose of the study, introducing the research questions that guide my inquiry, and positioning myself as both an investigator and a member of the very community I seek to understand.

As a queer international student residing in a small city myself, I carry an insider's perspective that shapes my interactions and methodology. This shared positionality allows me to approach participants with empathy and a heightened awareness of confidentiality concerns, awareness born from my own experiences of navigating visibility, privacy, and belonging. My intention from the outset has been to create a research environment grounded in mutual respect and safety, in which participants feel encouraged to speak openly and honestly. This reciprocal relationship, in which I am both witness and fellow traveller, facilitates the co-construction of knowledge that is authentic, contextually situated, and truly reflective of the realities faced in our community.

Following this introduction, I articulate the rationale for the project, emphasizing why this research is both timely and necessary. The significance of focusing on queer international

students in small cities in Ontario lies not only with addressing a tangible gap in existing scholarship but also with providing insights to drive policy and support in contexts where resources and visibility may be limited. Additionally, as I am located in Ontario and postsecondary education is a provincial and territorial jurisdiction, I limited the context of analysis to Ontario rather than Canada as a whole. Postsecondary education in Canada is governed at the provincial level, resulting in substantial differences across provinces in policy frameworks, funding models, tuition regulations, and the design of student support and equity initiatives. Focusing on Ontario allows me to maintain contextual coherence and analytical depth, enabling a more rigorous examination of queer international students' educational experiences, sense of belonging, and well-being within a shared governance framework. To frame the study appropriately, I then present a literature review that situates my research within the established academic landscape, highlighting how issues of queerness, migration, and education intersect and diverge across contexts.

I go on to describe the theoretical and methodological foundations that underpin my approach. Situated in both transformative and constructivist worldviews, as detailed in later chapters, my work draws on the frameworks of intersectionality, neoliberalism, and identity management theory. These perspectives enable me to situate participants' narratives within broader dialogues on power, identity, and resilience, uncovering both commonalities and tensions across stories.

The specific research questions guiding this dissertation are as follows: *How does being queer shape the educational experiences and daily lives of queer international students in small cities in Ontario? What institutional and community supports and barriers do these students encounter? How do their experiences affect their sense of belonging and well-being?* These

questions are at the heart of my inquiry and aim to unravel the intricate interplay between identity, place, and lived reality. By pursuing answers, I seek not only to add to the scholarly discourse but to foreground the voices, agency, and needs of those who continue to chart new paths in unfamiliar landscapes.

In the chapters that follow, I detail the rationale for this research, review relevant literature, articulate my theoretical grounding, explain the methodological choices, and reflect on the ethical commitments guiding the study. Building on this foundation, the analysis chapter presents a thematic narrative exploration of participant experiences, highlighting key patterns and individual journeys. The discussion chapter then synthesizes these insights, engaging critically with theoretical frameworks and drawing out the academic and practical implications for higher education and community contexts. Finally, the conclusion chapter reflects on the broader societal significance of these findings, the contributions to existing scholarship, and my own learning as a researcher within this community. Throughout this dissertation, I remain committed to ensuring that the knowledge generated is rooted in collective experience, shared vulnerabilities, and ongoing hope for more inclusive and affirming futures for queer international students.

1.1 From Suffering to Purpose: Grounding My Scholarly Journey

> *I came to theory because I was hurting, the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend, to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw, in theory, then a location for healing*. — bell hooks (1994), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (p. 59)

My developing scholarly identity intertwines with activism, rooted in the connection forged through collective suffering. hooks (1994) eloquently expresses the transformative power of theory in healing personal pain and comprehending the world. Similarly, my scholarly journey reflects my pursuit of knowledge. Various traumas and experiences of marginalisation have shaped my life since childhood in Delhi. Growing up in a slum, I witnessed my mother endure domestic abuse at the hands of my alcoholic father.

In another dimension, I liked playing with dolls and participating in arts and crafts with girls instead of playing cricket and kabaddi like other boys. I was bullied for not just these "girly" interests of mine but also for the way I talked and walked. After being called a *chhakka* (a derogatory term used for gay men and transwomen in India) for not adhering to masculine standards, I began to wonder if I was a *Hijra* (refers to a traditional transwomen community) and not a so-called normal boy. My mother was worried that if I continued to behave like a girl, *Hijras* would take me away and make me join their community to do the job of begging (Badhai Maangna). At the time, I did not have a vocabulary to describe my experiences.

I root most of my problems within one concept: "masculinity." I learned about this term in grade ten, but my understanding of masculinity at the time differed from what I have now. Masculinity to me was about ways in which most men around me expressed themselves - aggressive, sexist, misogynist, and destructive behaviours to oppress women and those lower on the power hierarchy than themselves. My comprehension of gender concepts matured as I aged, which helped me cope with a significant identity crisis I was living in because there was no representation in the school, media, or society of my gender and performance of normative masculinity. Others around me were comfortable (proud, in fact) in adhering to the ideals of

"being a man" as observed in their homes, society, and media. I always questioned, "Why am I abnormal?" "Why do I not objectify women's bodies, unlike my male peers?"

It was only when I began my MA in Education at Azim Premji University in 2019 that I started viewing my experiences through conceptual lenses. I could relate to gender theorists such as Judith Butler, who refers to the performance of gender as not a reflection of an essential or fixed male identity but instead as a series of culturally and socially determined acts (Butler, 1990). Perhaps I was different because I idealized my mother instead of my father and all other male characters around me. People around me, even women, had a rigid, normative, and socially conditioned notion of gender. Anyone who did not follow the norms established within the male-dominated society was subjected to not only criticism but also rejection, abuse, and oppression. Such experiences piqued my interest in exploring gender through the lens of masculinity.

The themes that I discerned from my experiences began to shape my research focus. I moved to Canada in 2022, considering it a queer-friendly country and a safer space in which to live. However, I learned about new challenges as I navigated further. As a queer international student in Thunder Bay, I faced unique challenges related to privacy, safety, cultural barriers, limited support, and lack of visibility within the overwhelmingly white queer community. Maintaining privacy was particularly challenging due to my experiences in India, a similar concern expressed by participants in a report by Chatterjee (2023), where being queer carries a social stigma. The fear of exposure associated with potential bullying led to heightened stress and anxiety, inhibiting my ability to express my identity openly. Cultural and language barriers further hindered my access to queer spaces, making me feel excluded and unable to feel a sense of belonging. Having struggled to understand and manage my identities, I became curious about scholarly conversations around *identity management theory* (Cupach & Imahori, 1993).

Despite a substantial international student population on campus, I discovered a lack of fellow international students in the queer space at Lakehead University called Pride Central (since renamed as the Pride and Gender Equity Centre). I also experienced bullying and scrutiny from fellow Indian students regarding my feminine gender expression. For instance, some men from India who used to work with me on campus called me a woman (in a derogatory way) due to my long nails. Although I was out to everyone in India, I did not have the courage and did not feel safe to share my gender and sexuality with anyone at that workplace, specifically those Indian boys. These experiences fuelled my interest in studying the experiences of queer international students in small Ontario cities, acknowledging the fact that 2SLGBTQ+ advocates in Thunder Bay say Canada's laws are not protecting them from hate (Allan, 2023).

1.2 Unpacking the 'Small City': Defining the Curious Core of My Research

As far as the definition of a small city is concerned, population alone cannot serve as a definitive criterion for classifying a city as small, medium, or large, given the complex interplay between demographic size, resources, and socio-economic dynamics. Statistics Canada (2021) classifies population centres into three groups based on size: small population centres (1,000 to 29,999 residents), medium population centres (30,000 to 99,999 residents), and large urban population centres (100,000 or more residents). However, these classifications do not fully capture the nuances of resource distribution, infrastructure, and socio-cultural factors that also contribute to the lived experiences of residents.

Canada has experienced unprecedented population growth in 2023 and 2024, primarily driven by increased immigration (Kerr, 2024). While the population surge reflects Canada’s growing appeal as a destination, it raises critical questions about whether resources and infrastructure have kept pace with this rapid growth. Kerr (2024), a demographer who has

closely tracked Canada's demographic trends over three decades, notes that following 2015 population growth accelerated significantly. Despite a temporary decline during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Canada recorded a population increase of over half a million in 2021 (509,285 individuals), nearly a million in 2022 (930,422 individuals), and an unprecedented 1.27 million individuals in 2023. This shift marks a dramatic rise in Canada's population growth rate, which has surged from approximately 1.0% annually to 3.2% in 2023 (Kerr, 2024).

This sharp increase in population has not been matched by corresponding growth in support systems and resources. For instance, in 2023, when population growth reached an all-time high, Canada faced a significant housing crisis. While immigration has contributed to rising housing demand, the crisis itself is rooted in systemic failures and the Canadian government's poorly planned immigration policies (Al Mallees, 2024). In fact, as early as 2022, the government was warned about the lack of alignment between immigration targets and resource availability. A report by Richardson and Hussain (2022) highlighted a "misalignment between the study programs pursued by international students and labour market needs" (para. 30), advocating for increased enrolment in fields like healthcare, trades, and education.

Additionally, Heisler (2024) underscores the challenges faced by international students in a tightening job market, exacerbated by the fastest population growth in 67 years. The struggles of this demographic point to a broader mismatch between population growth and resource allocation, particularly in small cities where support systems for marginalised groups, including queer international students, are often limited (Hulko, 2018; Myrdahl, 2015).

Given this context, it became necessary to operationalize the concept of a "small city" in ways that account for not only population size but also the availability of critical resources. For the purposes of my research, I define a small city as having a population of approximately

150,000 people with limited resources for LGBTQ+ individuals, such as support groups, healthcare services, and community centres and events. This definition aligns with scholarly perspectives, such as those of Hulko (2018), who argue that factors like proximity to larger urban centres and local cultural-political climates also play significant roles in shaping resource availability for queer individuals.

My participants for this research are located in small cities in Ontario with populations of up to 150,000 people. Their geographic isolation makes these cities important sites for examining the intersection of population growth, resource allocation, and queer-inclusive support systems.

1.3 Illuminating The Invisible: The Rationale Behind My Inquiry

As a queer international student myself, I am deeply connected to this research both personally and academically. My positionality allows me to approach the topic with empathy and a nuanced understanding, yet it also requires a reflexive and critical lens to ensure rigorous analysis. My research contributes to the literature on queer migration and international student experiences, expanding it by focusing on the unexplored context of small cities. This study is not only academically significant but also socially necessary, as it illuminates the complexities of identity, migration, and education for a marginalised group that remains largely invisible in scholarly discourse.

While my decision to pursue a Ph.D. was motivated by a personal goal, it is also rooted in a broader purpose and a commitment to give back to society. Echoing hooks (1994), I am drawn to this program as a means of seeking healing for myself and providing a supportive environment for my community of fellow queer international students. Concurrently, I contribute to the existing research within the realm of queerness intersecting with the internationalisation of

education. I aim to enhance the efforts of scholars and researchers who advocate for equitable support to all students, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds, so they may flourish and reach their full potential.

The next chapter of this dissertation contextualizes my research within existing scholarship on queer experience in higher education, migration, and international education. By engaging with key theories and debates, I establish a foundation for understanding the intersections of queerness and international student mobility in small urban spaces.

Chapter 2: Mapping the Terrain: Queerness, Migration, and the Neoliberal University

Although Canadian postsecondary institutions are often characterised as inclusive and progressive, there remain substantial gaps in the visibility and scholarly attention paid to certain populations. Among these, queer international students represent a group whose lived realities are frequently obscured within campus culture and underrepresented in academic research (Campbell et al., 2024; Patrick, 2014). The intersectional challenges faced by these students, including homophobia, cisheteronormativity, racism, and xenophobia, persist (Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022) despite broader institutional commitments to equity and diversity (Gazette, University of Ottawa, 2025). These barriers are amplified in the experiences of queer international students whose navigation of academic, social, and personal spheres is shaped by a complex interaction of identity markers. In this chapter, I review the existing literature at the confluence of sexuality, migration, and education, highlighting both the persistent gaps in research and the pressing need for nuanced inquiry into the multilayered factors that contour the day-to-day lives of queer international students in small Ontario cities. Drawing from scholarship across several fields, I situate this study within ongoing conversations on intersectionality, belonging, and the marginalisation of non-normative identities in postsecondary contexts.

To further illustrate these systemic challenges, recent scholarship has documented the everyday realities of discrimination and exclusion that queer students routinely encounter within postsecondary environments. Building on these concerns, existing scholarship has begun to illuminate the tangible effects of institutional cultures and classroom practices on the well-being and academic success of queer students. For instance, Smith (2016) found that queer students often face microaggressions and discrimination (homophobia) in both academic and social settings, which can adversely affect their mental health and academic performance (Ahmed,

2024). Similarly, Quinterno (2022) highlights the prevalence of cisheteronormative curricula and the lack of inclusive policies, which marginalise non-heteronormative identities and reinforce feelings of exclusion among queer students.

Racism and xenophobia are additional barriers that further complicate the experiences of marginalised students in Canadian universities. Cranston and Bennett (2024) document the systemic racism that students of colour encounter in Canadian higher education, ranging from overt discrimination to subtle forms of exclusion. Students of colour often report feeling isolated and unsupported, which can hinder their academic success and overall well-being (Caxaj et al., 2021). Xenophobia, particularly towards international students, exacerbates these challenges (Guo & Guo, 2021). According to Houshmand et al. (2014), international students frequently experience prejudice and cultural insensitivity, which can lead to a sense of alienation and difficulty integrating into the campus community.

Many queer international students also identify as people of colour, women, trans or non-binary individuals, which subjects them to unique challenges. Some also describe themselves as disabled or differently-abled (Lyerly, 2023; Supple & Agbenyega, 2015). The intersectional nature of such identities results in multilayered marginalisation, where the compounded effects of multiple forms of oppression create unique and complex challenges. Further, Garvey et al. (2019) note that queer and trans students of colour navigate spaces that are simultaneously racist and homophobic, requiring them to constantly manage and negotiate their identities in ways that are emotionally and mentally taxing. These navigations can be conceptualized through Frye's (1983) account of oppression as a "double bind" (p. 2), a situation where the available options are few and each carries a penalty. In contexts where spaces offer partial safety (e.g., racial belonging without queer safety, or queer belonging without racial safety), choice is not liberatory

but structured through intersecting exclusions. Frye's conceptualization clarifies why negotiation is not merely individual strategy but an effect of interlocking social organization .

Capturing these various social identifications, Crenshaw's (1997) intersectionality theory provides a useful framework for understanding how overlapping identities create distinct experiences of oppression. For example, queer international students who are women or non-binary face both gender-based and sexuality-based discrimination, in addition to racial, xenophobic, and ability biases. Central to understanding the oppression faced by queer international students is the concept of cisheteronormativity, which refers to the societal expectation that everyone is cisgender and heterosexual. This normative standard underpins much of the discrimination against queer students, as it invalidates and marginalises non-cisheteronormative identities (Quinterno, 2022). Amidst the marginalisation caused by cisheteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression, my research is a form of advocacy for the need to shed light on the unique experiences of queer international students and the imperative for tailored support systems.

My discussion in the literature review would be notably succinct were it solely to encompass literature addressing international students within Canada who identify as LGBTQIA+, collectively referred to as "queer," an inclusive term. Given the dearth of resources addressing this specific topic, I have expanded the scope of my inquiry to include an examination of overarching ideologies that significantly influence the contemporary circumstances of international students, notably neoliberalism and internationalisation. Through this expanded lens, I identify lacunae in existing scholarship and articulate how my research addresses these gaps in knowledge.

This chapter is organised in two main parts. Section 2.1 outlines the theoretical framing guiding this study, drawing on intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism. Section 2.2 reviews the literature on the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, international students within neoliberal Canada, federal and provincial policy and immigration governance, international students and immigration, queer identity, layers of marginalisation within queer students, queer international students, and queer international students in small cities. Section 2.3 concludes the chapter.

2.1 Theoretical Framing: Intersectionality, Identity Management Theory, and Neoliberalism

To bring coherence to this study, I draw on intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism as complementary theoretical lenses. I approach these frameworks as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 2006): rather than using theory as a rigid template that predetermines what the literature (or later, the data) must establish. These three frameworks help conceptualize queer international students' educational and everyday experiences as simultaneously structural, interactional, and political-economic. Intersectionality foregrounds how sexuality and gender are co-constituted with race, ability, nationality, class, religion, language, and immigration status (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; 2013). Identity management theory (e.g., Cupach & Imahori, 1993) helps theorize how students navigate these conditions in practice through strategic disclosure, concealment, and self-presentation across different audiences and settings. Neoliberalism (e.g., Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005) situates these experiences within the marketisation of higher education, the commodification of international education, and the broader governance of migrant precarity. Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for reviewing scholarship not only on "queer students" or "international students" but on how queer

international students' lives are shaped by place, power, and institutional arrangements, including the specific conditions of small Ontario cities.

These frameworks function as analytical tools throughout the dissertation. Intersectionality helps me examine how sexuality and gender are co-constituted with race, nationality, class, language, religion, and immigration status; identity management theory helps me analyse how students negotiate disclosure, concealment, and self-presentation across different audiences and settings; and neoliberalism allows me to connect these lived experiences to the broader marketisation of higher education, the commodification of international education, and the shifting of responsibility onto students. Used together, these frameworks help me interpret queer international students' experiences as simultaneously structural, interactional, and political-economic.

Intersectionality is especially useful here because it shifts the analysis away from treating identities as separate variables (e.g., "queer" plus "international") and toward examining how power operates through co-constitution: sexuality, gender, race, and migratory status are produced together through institutional practices and social relations, shaping what becomes possible, risky, or costly in everyday life (e.g., Choubak & Safdar, 2023). Crenshaw's framework not only suggests that people can experience multiple forms of oppression, it also indicates that dominant systems and discourses often fail to recognise those experiences precisely because they rely on single identity logics (Crenshaw, 1991). In the context of Canadian postsecondary education, such recognition matters because the categories "LGBTQ+ student" and "international student" are often addressed through separate institutional programs and policy conversations, even though queer international students encounter conditions that emerge in the overlap of categories like racialisation, accent discrimination, immigration uncertainty,

transnational family surveillance, and campus climates shaped by whiteness and cisheteronormativity.

Collins' (2000) account of the matrix of domination further emphasises that power operates across interlocking domains (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal). What she means is how intersecting systems of oppression, specifically race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, function simultaneously rather than independently. She emphasises that individuals experience both privilege and oppression depending on their location within the matrix. The matrix is helpful for understanding why many experiences cannot be reduced to either "individual prejudice" or "policy gaps" alone. For queer international students, discrimination and exclusion can be produced through the interaction between institutional arrangements (e.g., unevenly trained staff, limited culturally responsive counselling, assumptions embedded in forms and services) and community dynamics (e.g., small-city recognizability, racialised norms of belonging, and the concentration of queer infrastructure in large cities). Frye's (1983) theorization of oppression helps sharpen what it means for these domains to be interlocking in lived experience. She describes oppression as operating through a network of systematically related barriers that confine movement and make many ordinary routes of living costly or dangerous, what she refers to as the double-bind. Alongside intersectionality, Frye helps illuminate how queer international students can be steered into no-win decisions about visibility, belonging, and safety, decisions shaped by institutions and communities rather than personal preference.

Following Collins and Bilge (2020), I treat intersectionality not simply as an "identity framework" but as an analytic tool for examining how inequality is organised through institutions and everyday life. This orientation is particularly relevant in small-city contexts,

where place can amplify visibility and social surveillance, shape who is read as “out of place,” and constrain access to queer community and culturally resonant supports (Hulko, 2018). Intersectionality thus helps explain why “queer inclusion” in Canada cannot be assumed as uniform across contexts and why the same institutional environment may feel affirming for some students while remaining precarious or alienating for others based on intersecting positioning.

Identity management theory complements intersectionality by helping explain how queer international students negotiate visibility, disclosure, and self-presentation across different social and institutional contexts. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective provides valuable insights into the strategies that individuals employ to present and negotiate their identities. Brown (2005) extends these dramaturgical perspectives to various social situations while Smith (2016) does likewise to the political realms. For queer international students, managing their identity involves navigating the intricacies of social interactions, often in unfamiliar cultural settings (Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022; Valosik, 2015). His framework helps conceptualize the performative nature of their identity as they engage with others within the socio-cultural fabric of small Ontario cities.

Identity management theory further refines this analysis by treating identity as something that is co-constructed and negotiated in communication rather than simply expressed from within (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). This is particularly relevant for queer international students because “audience” is rarely singular. Students may navigate disclosure differently with family “back home,” co-national or diasporic peers, white Canadian classmates, queer peers, faculty and staff, employers, and service providers, each context carrying different norms, risks, and potential costs. In this sense, what can appear as inconsistency (“out in one space, not out in another”) becomes legible as a strategic and contextually rational response to intersecting pressures

(Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022; Valosik, 2015). These negotiations can also become juridically consequential in migration regimes. In Murray's (2014) analysis of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) refugee hearings, claimants' credibility is assessed through fine-grained interrogation of their narratives of home and through expectations that they can demonstrate recognizable participation in LGBT spaces, effectively making identity performance and spatial knowledge part of legal evaluation. Read alongside identity management theory, such evaluation illustrates, drawing from Murray (2014) how disclosure and self-presentation are sometimes institutionally demanded and audited, not simply personally chosen.

Such a lens also helps clarify why disclosure is often experienced as situational rather than binary. A postcolonial perspective helps explain why coming out cannot be treated as a singular, linear, universal event that marks an authentic queer life course. Said (1979) argues that dominant Western knowledge systems work through discursive authority, an "accepted grid" that filters the Other into legibility, often enabling the West to "speak for" and represent those positioned as non-Western subjects (p. 6). Mohanty (1988) similarly shows how Western scholarship installs "the West" as the "primary referent," producing non-Western subjects as a coherent "Other," and thereby "discursively coloniz[ing]" heterogeneity (p. 62). These critiques suggest that the coming out script can operate as a Western narrative of intelligibility. Queer migrants and racialized/non-Western queer folks may be recognized as credible only insofar as they can narrate sexuality/gender through individualist disclosure and stable identity categories, while more relational, strategic, or context-dependent modes of visibility are misread as inauthentic or "not yet out."

Further, identity management theory (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Imahori & Cupach, 2005) can help to understand how queer international students navigate and manage their identities within the institutional context of Canadian universities, which can significantly impact their experiences and well-being (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2009; Huot & Rudman, 2011; Zaidi & Chaar, 2020). Identity management theory explores how people communicate and manage their identity across different cultural backgrounds and interpersonal communications. It is particularly focused on the ways in which individuals maintain their social identities as they enter and engage with various cultures or social groups (Imahori & Cupach, 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000). For queer international students, their identity is not solely defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity; it intersects with other aspects of their identity, such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion (Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022; Patrick, 2014). The intersectionality of identities contributes to the complexity of experiences, influencing mental health, social integration, and academic success (Angoff et al., 2020; Ghavami et al., 2016). In this dissertation, identity management theory therefore functions as an analytical tool for understanding how queer international students manage visibility, privacy, belonging, and safety across different audiences and settings.

Neoliberalism is a key analytic framework for understanding contemporary higher education because it is not only an economic policy orientation but also a governing rationality that reshapes institutional priorities, social relations, and the kinds of subjects students are expected to become. My use of neoliberalism is informed especially by Harvey’s (2005) account of neoliberalism as a political-economic project that extends market logics, privatisation, deregulation, and competition across social life, and by Giroux’s (2002, 2004) critique of neoliberalism as a cultural and educational force that redefines education in market terms and

weakens its democratic and public purposes. Together, Harvey helps me situate neoliberalism at the level of political economy and institutional restructuring, while Giroux clarifies how these logics shape educational values, student subjectivities, and the everyday organisation of academic life. I draw on both scholars to understand how queer international students may encounter higher education not simply as learners in neutral institutions, but as subjects navigating increasingly marketised systems that individualise risk and unevenly distribute care. While neoliberalism is often summarised as marketisation, privatisation, and reduced public spending, scholars argue that it also operates through the production of a particular moral and institutional common sense: individuals are expected to treat education as an investment, to manage risk privately, and to translate structural problems into personal responsibility (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Rose, 1999). In higher education, this rationality is visible in the prioritisation of competitiveness, revenue generation, efficiency, and reputational management, alongside the offloading of support and wellbeing onto students as matters of individual resilience and self-management. Giroux (2002, 2004) is especially useful here because he argues that neoliberalism recasts education in corporate terms, diminishes its democratic and public mission, and normalises the treatment of students as consumers rather than as members of a learning community.

Neoliberalism is useful here in two related senses. First, it marks a shift from education as a public good toward education as a competitive market shaped by privatisation, efficiency, audit culture, and revenue generation. Second, it helps explain responsibilisation: the expectation that individuals manage structural insecurity privately, whether around tuition, work, housing, immigration uncertainty, or belonging. In this dissertation, neoliberalism is therefore not treated

as background context alone, but as an analytic lens for understanding how queer international students experience pressure, risk, and support in small Ontario cities.

2.2 Literature Review

The discussion below builds from my theoretical framing by tracing how higher education's shifting relationship to the public good, public funding, and market logic has reorganised the institutional landscape in which international students pursue education in Canada. One of the lenses that I used to look at queer international students is the internationalisation of higher education in Western countries, which has evolved significantly in the last couple of decades (University Affairs, 2023; de Wit & Altbach, 2020). The phenomenon of internationalisation has increasingly become intertwined with neoliberal principles (Crossman et al., 2022), emphasizing market-driven policies and the commodification of education (Martin, 2022). Beck (2021) cautions that this market turn is frequently obscured by institutional narratives, with universities often deploying the rhetoric of academic rationales to legitimate the dramatic rise in international activity. Such influence of neoliberalism on higher education has led to the prioritisation of economic factors such as revenue generation, competition, and efficiency (Crossman et al., 2022; Gupta & Su, 2023).

The rise of neoliberal policies has positioned EDID as a tool for institutional competitiveness, branding, and marketability, often prioritizing performative inclusion and measurable outcomes over genuine systemic change (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Beck's (2021) critique of internationalisation's "social responsibility" turn is useful here because it surfaces the political problem the EDID discussion points toward, "who will take up social responsibility, for whom, and to what ends?" (p. 136). Read alongside critiques of performative EDID, this question underscores how equity language can circulate as institutional legitimacy

while leaving core structures of exclusion, racialisation, cisheteronormativity, and migrant precarity largely intact. While globalisation and workforce diversity have increased the visibility of marginalised groups, neoliberal frameworks frequently shift the focus from structural inequities to individual responsibility, diluting the transformative potential of social justice efforts (Mohanty, 2003). Consequently, EDID initiatives often serve economic and institutional interests rather than challenging power structures, underscoring the importance of critically examining their implementation within neoliberal contexts (Chun & Evans, 2016; Giroux, 2014).

Neoliberal policies have often resulted in the corporatisation of educational institutions, prioritizing efficiency and profitability over more holistic, equitable, and inclusive approaches to learning (Baltodano, 2012; Saunders, 2010). Such corporatisation has led to the marginalisation of underrepresented groups and the suppression of diversity, as educational systems have become increasingly geared towards serving the needs of the market rather than the diverse needs of student populations.

However, the emergence of EDID initiatives can also be seen as a response to the detrimental effects of neoliberalism on educational and social outcomes (Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2021). One could argue, as Hong (2024) and Robinson (2021) do, that equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonisation (EDID) promote neoliberal and neocolonial values. However, EDID is a complex and multifaceted issue that warrants careful examination. While there are undoubtedly connections between the rise of neoliberal policies and the increased emphasis on EDID in contemporary academia and workplaces, the relationship is not a simple or direct one. EDID initiatives can also be seen as a means of challenging and resisting the more harmful effects of neoliberalism as educators, administrators, and community members work to create more inclusive and equitable systems and structures (Baltodano, 2012; del Cerro Santamaría,

2020; Morgan, 2021; Robinson, 2020). As the shortcomings of a narrowly market-driven approach have become increasingly apparent, there has been a growing recognition of the need to address systemic inequities and promote more inclusive and equitable practices within educational institutions and beyond (Baltodano, 2012). In this sense, EDID can be viewed as a counterpoint to the neoliberal agenda, an attempt to reclaim the public good and democratic values that have been eroded by the dominance of market-based logic (Baltodano, 2012; Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2021)

A neoliberal shift has implications for various aspects of academia, including recruitment strategies, curriculum development, and institutional priorities (Halliday, 2022; Taskoh, 2020). One of the clearest expressions of this shift is the market-driven internationalisation of higher education, through which universities increasingly recruit international students as sources of revenue, talent, and institutional competitiveness (Crossman et al., 2022; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Martin, 2022). In this sense, the growing globalisation of education has not unfolded separately from neoliberalism; rather, it has been one of the main ways neoliberal priorities have been enacted in Canadian higher education. In 2023, Canada finalized 1,089,600 study permit applications, up from 917,900 in 2022, the largest number ever (Immigration Refugees Citizenship Canada, 2024). This growth did not happen accidentally. Over time, declining public funding, institutional dependence on international tuition, and government international education agendas collectively encouraged a deliberate expansion of recruitment (Crossman et al., 2022; Martin, 2022). Federal strategies such as *Building on Success: International Education Strategy 2019–2024* explicitly framed international students as contributors to innovation, export growth, and labour-force development, while Ontario's more recent policy directions have linked international student allocations to labour-market needs (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Ontario

Ministry of Colleges and Universities [MCU], 2024a, 2025). At the same time, the desire for international study has been cultivated through longer colonial legacies that attach prestige to Global North education and through globalisation narratives that market overseas study as a route to mobility, employability, and possible settlement (de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). I discuss these policy developments in more detail in Section 2.2.3. Even so, the Canadian government and Canadian universities remained poorly prepared to support the scale of growth they had helped produce. International students in various studies had already reported challenges (e.g., Calder et al., 2016; Chiu, 2017; Dhillon, 2024; Sabzalieva, 2021), including homesickness and loneliness, which can be made worse by financial constraints, immigration laws governing student visas, career opportunities, the housing crisis, and cultural differences (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018; Bhugra, 2024; Gan & Forbes-Mewett, 2018; Worae & Edgerton 2023). The 2023 increase in enrolment exacerbated these existing issues.

While issues like the housing crisis in 2023, 2024 and 2025 in Canada were deemed to be due to systemic market failures (Zhu & Ali, 2024), international students were largely blamed for causing them (Ellis, 2023). Ellis highlights that blaming international students for Canada's housing crisis is both analytically flawed and rooted in xenophobia, rather than factual economic analysis. Population growth of all types, including domestic students, workers, and various newcomers, puts pressure on the need for more housing. As a result of blaming international students for causing crises such as increased food prices and housing shortages the number of international study permits in Canada has been essentially cut in half with the international student cap in 2025 (Norton, 2024; Wong, 2025). Reflecting on the vulnerability of mobility-centred internationalisation, Beck (2021) asks whether the internationalisation of higher education is entering a state which is neither dead nor quite alive. Canada's subsequent

enrolment caps and sectoral instability further illustrate how internationalisation's market model produces institutional dependence on international students.

Worae and Edgerton (2023) surveyed 712 international students and found that 64.6% of participants reported feeling stressed due to challenges faced off campus, while 57.1% felt stressed because they were away from their families and loved ones back home. Additionally, over half of the respondents (55.9%) indicated that making friends with Canadian students was difficult for them, and 52.3% expressed feeling stressed by challenges encountered on campus. Further, they found that respondents faced several financial challenges. The most common issue reported was insufficient funding opportunities compared to Canadian peers (74.9%). Additionally, 61.5% of respondents noted the 20-hour-per-week limit on part-time work for international students as a significant challenge, and 57.9% had difficulty paying tuition fees. Nearly half of the respondents (47.4%) reported difficulties with paying rent, and 35.7% indicated they needed to borrow money from friends and relatives to survive. Bhugra (2024) mentioned that Khalsa Aid, an international charity, helped over 8,200 international students struggling to access food, clothes, and shelter in Canadian cities. They call for both government and postsecondary institutions to tailor their support mechanisms for international students facing challenges.

Meanwhile, queer individuals face additional barriers (Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022; Valosik, 2015) and an added "international student" identity makes the situation more challenging for them. While there is a plethora of research on international students in global north countries (see, for example, Renn, 2010; Howe et al., 2023), very little of it recognises gender and sexual minorities or the additional barriers they face (e.g., Patrick, 2014), and none of it takes place outside of large urban centres (e.g., Corkum, 2015). At the same time,

international queer students face a double barrier (Valosik, 2015), transitioning to studying and living in Canada within the nexus of both identities, being both queer and international (Nguyen et al., 2017). Struby Struble, the coordinator of the Missouri University LGBT Resource Centre, underscores that queer international students experience social alienation within their international student circles due to their LGBTQ+ identity while simultaneously feeling isolated within the campus community owing to their status as international students (Valosik, 2015).

Additionally, focusing on small cities provides an even more nuanced perspective, as these locales often differ from larger urban centres in terms of resources, support services, and community dynamics for queer population (Hulko & Hovanes, 2017). Using the example of Thunder Bay, in 2023, international students made up approximately 45% of the total student population at the city's Confederation College (Hobbs, 2023; Law, 2024). In 2021–22, Lakehead University, which has campuses in the two small cities of Thunder Bay and Orillia, had 2,024 international students from 85 countries, an increase of 12% from the previous year (Lakehead University, 2026). Given the increasing recognition of diversity and inclusivity as key pillars of higher education (e.g., Buckner et al., 2021; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019) and the evolving societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Boustani & Taylor, 2020; Evangelista et al., 2022; Goldberg, 2023), I explore how these changes intersect with the experiences of queer international students in small cities within higher education institutions.

2.2.1 Neoliberal Shift in Western Universities

Marginson and Yang (2024) highlight the term "public" in the English language as having originated from the political cultures of Euro-American (Western) countries, particularly those that are English-speaking, such as the United States and the United Kingdom and other nations like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Among the multiple meanings of "public" in

English, one of the strands is “the public good” as a condition of universal welfare, well-being, or beneficence.

Dewey, an American philosopher, advocated for the idea that education serves a public purpose and benefits society as a whole (Dewey, 1916/1930) and emphasised that education is not only crucial for individual development but also essential for the well-being and progress of society, aligning with the concept of education as a public good. While allocating resources and public funding effectively is essential for the successful reform and transformation of the higher education system (Zhang et al., 2016), universities in Canada have faced a significant decline in public funding (Fallis, 2024).

The promotion of free-market capitalism, deregulation, privatisation, reduced government spending, and minimal government intervention with emphasis on individual responsibility over collective welfare have led to the marketisation of education, where educational institutions operate more like businesses focused on revenue generation rather than public service (Bourassa, 2019; Giroux, 2002). Consequently, public funding for higher education has decreased (Beck, 2021; Dougherty & Natow, 2022; Zhang et al., 2016), prompting universities to seek alternative revenue sources, primarily through increased tuition fees, particularly targeting international students who generally pay significantly higher fees than their domestic counterparts (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Rose & Dustin, 2009). Beck (2021) makes this dependency explicit in the Canadian context, noting that a decline in government funding has pushed universities to become heavily dependent on international student enrolments to make up the shortfall. This framing clarifies why internationalisation is not simply a cultural or pedagogical project but a fiscal strategy that reorganises institutional priorities, often at the

expense of sustained, equity-oriented supports, thus exacerbating the vulnerability of international students.

The pursuit of international students as lucrative income sources often resulted in their exploitation, with limited work opportunities, insufficient scholarships, and inadequate support services all contributing to their financial and personal challenges (Hoxhaj et al., 2025; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Drawing on a mixed-methods survey of 124 international students across diploma to Ph.D. programs in the Greater Toronto Area, Hoxhaj et al. (2025) demonstrate that these structural constraints are most visible in the labour market, where 71.8% of participants reported increasing difficulty securing employment over time due to intensified competition. Nearly half of the respondents (46.2%) indicated they were unable to cover basic living expenses, despite employment having no statistically significant impact on academic performance, underscoring a normalisation of financial precarity rather than its resolution. The fact that 74.4% of respondents intend to pursue improved job prospects after graduation further underscores the position of international students as financially reliant yet constrained by systemic barriers. This condition not only limits their meaningful participation in the labour market but also prompts ethical questions about fair access to employment, economic security, and the obligations of postsecondary institutions to address structural inequities that disadvantage non-domestic learners (Ellis, 2023).

Ellis further demonstrates that international student graduates are frequently funnelled into precarious and low-skilled employment, operating within labour markets that depend on their availability as flexible and easily exploitable workers. Extending the analysis beyond the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, Ellis (2023) shows that international student graduates who relocate to less populous or predominantly white regions are frequently racialised as temporary,

expendable workers assumed to be seeking a “Canadian experience” rather than long-term employment. This perception positions them as contingent labour whose commitment and professional legitimacy are routinely questioned, resulting in internships and practicum placements that fail to translate into stable post-graduation employment. Such dynamics illustrate how racialisation intersects with international student mobility to reproduce labour market exclusion, particularly in regional contexts where international graduates are treated as transient and replaceable rather than as skilled professionals.

Building on the above mentioned structural and regional inequities, neoliberalism further shapes the experiences of international students in countries like Canada. Under neoliberal policies, education is increasingly commodified, resulting in higher tuition fees, reduced public funding, and the exploitation of international students without adequate institutional support (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Giroux, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Indeed, Usher (2021) projected that by 2025 Canadian universities would derive over half of their revenue from international student tuition, highlighting how financial dependence on this population reinforces structural vulnerabilities. However, as noted above, amid persistent challenges such as the housing crisis and the political framing of international students as contributors to it, the federal government has imposed caps on international student admissions to curb the growth of Canada’s temporary population. Introduced in 2024, this cap has already reduced the number of study permit holders from over one million in early 2024 to approximately 725,000 by late 2025, with further reductions planned to bring the temporary resident population below 5% by 2027. As a result, the projected intake of new international students was capped at 270,000 in 2025 and remains lower under the 2026–2028 Immigration Levels Plan, intensifying financial precarity across the postsecondary sector (Wong, 2024). One

tangible outcome of this contraction is the suspension of 49 academic programs at Ontario's Centennial College following declining international enrolments (Carter, 2025).

While Dougherty and Natow (2022) underscore how neoliberal policies prioritize market efficiency, cost reduction, and competitiveness in higher education, these priorities are misaligned with the fundamental purpose of education, which is to serve as a levelling force in society, promoting equality and social justice (Dewey, 1930). Morley et al. (2014) highlight that “the dominant feature of the neoliberal market-led provision of education is the blurring and blending of boundaries between the public and private sphere” (p. 458), which exacerbates this misalignment. By focusing on efficiency and competition, neoliberal policies can undermine the broader educational mission to serve all members of society equitably (Ward, 2014). The withdrawal of government support has prompted universities to adopt fiscal strategies such as tuition fee increases, especially for international students, often called “cash cows” who pay three to four times higher tuition (Crawley, 2017; Ren, 2023; Todd, 2024). Beck (2021) captures this logic succinctly, arguing that internationalisation is driven largely by the recruitment of income-generating international students, a description that aligns with the persistence of “cash cow” discourse and the normalisation of structural precarity for non-domestic learners. The persistence of such discourse from 2017 through 2024, as evidenced by the cited literature above, indicates a longstanding acknowledgment of these practices. Yet there appears to be a continued lack of substantive measures to mitigate the exploitation of international students amidst the funding crises facing Canadian postsecondary institutions (Todd, 2024).

Such exploitation of international students reflects a broader trend towards the commercialisation and corporatisation of higher education, where universities are compelled to operate more like businesses, prioritizing financial sustainability above academic values. The

shift towards market-oriented funding models exacerbates inequalities within higher education, as institutions with greater financial resources are better positioned to thrive, leaving behind those with limited access to funding (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Tomlinson & Kelly, 2018). Consequently, the neoliberal restructuring of university funding has profound implications for the accessibility, affordability, and quality of higher education, posing significant challenges for both institutions and students alike (del Cerro Santamaría, 2020). Thus, understanding the implications of this funding shift is essential for critically evaluating the broader socio-economic dynamics shaping contemporary higher education.

2.2.2 International Students and the Neoliberal Context of Higher Education in Canada

Within the neoliberal context of Canadian higher education, international students occupy a unique and increasingly significant position. Martin (2022) highlights Ontario universities that once received 80 percent of their funding through provincial government grants but now receive around 40 percent of their operating revenue (Paikin, 2019). This significant decrease in public funding has paved the way for increased corporatisation (Martin, 2022). As I noted above, Canada has seen a notable rise in the number of international students in recent years (Immigration Refugees Citizenship Canada, 2024), driven in part by government policies aimed at attracting talent and generating revenue for universities (Crossman et al., 2022; Desai, 2024). International students are typically viewed as valuable economic assets, contributing substantial tuition fees and supporting local economies through their spending (Marginson, 2016).

However, the financial instability of some institutions highlights the limitations and risks of such internationalisation based on neoliberal approaches. For instance, in 2021, Laurentian University faced insolvency, which some erroneously argued was due to their failure to recruit enough international students (Schwabe, 2021). The university was forced to restructure its

financial plan under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act. Rather than highlighting the lack of international students and their tuition, Ontario's Auditor General attributed the financial catastrophe to capital expansions from 2010 to 2020, noting "poor management of its financial affairs," that led to the university's insolvency (Migneault, 2022, para. 1). Normand Labrie, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, warned that Laurentian's failure is “a sure sign of a structural problem,” indicating poor provincial funding as the key underlying issue (Cayouette, 2023, para. 11).

Tuition dollars from international students remains widely seen as a panacea for the financial challenges that postsecondary institutions face. Per a research report by MPOWER Financing, international students contributed C$36 billion to the Canadian economy in 2022 and were projected to contribute C$42 billion in 2024 (Ramani, 2023). These numbers align with neoliberal principles, emphasizing the marketisation of higher education and the pursuit of financial gains. However, the neoliberal framing of international students also raises concerns about their exploitation and marginalisation within Canadian academia (Gupta & Su, 2023; Lilach, 2022; Sabzalieva, 2021; Stirrett, 2022). The 2026 Ontario postsecondary education financial restructuring illustrates both the fragility of tuition-dependent internationalisation and the persistence of neoliberal cost-sharing strategies. Ontario announced $6.4 billion over four years in operating investments. However, it also ended the tuition freeze (permitting annual increases) and proposed restructuring OSAP so that grants would be capped at 25% from 85%, with the remainder delivered through student loans (MacDonald, 2026; Piercey, 2026). Student groups cited in MacDonald’s report warned that shifting aid from grants to loans would increase debt burdens, indicating that access is increasingly mediated through private indebtedness rather than public entitlement.

Despite their economic contributions to the postsecondary institutions as well as to the Canadian society (Dhillon, 2024), international students face various challenges, including high tuition fees (Desai, 2024), limited access to financial aid, and precarious immigration status (Calder et al., 2016; Chiu, 2017; Dhillon, 2024). Moreover, the emphasis on revenue generation may prioritize recruiting international students for their financial benefits (Bascaramurty et al., 2021) rather than ensuring their academic success and well-being (Halliday, 2022; James-Maceachern, 2018).

Furthermore, the neoliberal context exacerbates inequalities among students, particularly concerning access to resources and scholarship opportunities. International students are ineligible for many scholarship opportunities, including Tri-Council funding in Canada, which includes grants from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). With scattered exceptions across the funding programs, opportunities are only available to Canadian citizens and permanent residents (Canada Graduate Scholarships, Master's Program, 2025).

The commercialisation of education also may lead to a consumerist mindset among international students (Norris, 2020), prioritizing the pursuit of credentials and employability over critical engagement and intellectual growth (Marginson, 2016). In such a neoliberal context, it is essential to critically examine the situations and perspectives of international students in Canada and consider the broader implications of the market-oriented approaches to higher education. Understanding the complex dynamics shaping the experiences of international students is crucial for fostering inclusive and equitable academic environments that prioritize education as a public good (Dewey, 1930) rather than a commodity (Changamire et al., 2022;

Giroux, 2004; Poloma, 2017). To understand how these neoliberal conditions are formalised and managed, it is also necessary to examine the federal and provincial policy framework governing international students in Canada.

2.2.3 Federal and Provincial Policy Context/Immigration Governance

International students in Canada are shaped not only by institutional practices and public discourse but also by a policy architecture produced jointly by federal immigration policy and provincial postsecondary regulation. Canada's multicultural self-presentation forms part of the broader backdrop against which international students often imagine the country as welcoming and inclusive (Al-Haque, 2019; Kymlicka, 2021; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018). Yet the conditions of international student life are governed more directly by a multilevel policy architecture situated at the intersection of federal immigration authority and provincial jurisdiction over education. As the recent House of Commons report *Reconstituting Canada's International Student Program* makes clear, the federal government controls entry, admissibility, and study permits, while provinces and territories shape education systems, tuition and funding conditions, designated learning institutions, and the distribution of available attestation-letter spaces within their jurisdictions (House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2026). International students are therefore governed simultaneously as migrants and as students, with their experiences shaped by the interaction of visa rules, work-permit pathways, provincial regulation, and institutional recruitment practices.

At the federal level, policy has long framed international education as part of a broader economic and competitiveness agenda. In *Building on Success: International Education Strategy 2019–2024*, the federal government presents international education as a means of strengthening innovation, diversifying export markets, fostering prosperity, and ensuring that Canada's labour

force has the skills and talent needed to compete globally (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). The strategy explicitly aims to diversify the countries from which students come, the levels and fields of study they pursue, and the locations in which they study across Canada. It also positions international students as desirable future permanent residents and as contributors to labour-force growth, especially in the context of an aging population (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). In this framing, international students are not only learners or members of campus communities; they are also mobile human capital, prospective workers, and instruments of national economic strategy. Read alongside scholarship on neoliberal internationalisation (Beck, 2021; Crossman et al., 2022), the strategy makes visible how international education is embedded within state projects of competitiveness and market expansion.

Since 2024, however, federal policy has shifted from expansion and diversification toward control, integrity, and sustainability. In January 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) introduced a national cap on new study permit applications, required most applicants to submit a provincial or territorial attestation letter, and justified these measures in relation to unsustainable growth, institutional over-enrolment, and pressures on housing, health care, and other services (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024a). The same reforms restricted post-graduation work permit eligibility for programs delivered through curriculum licensing arrangements and narrowed spousal open work permit access, signalling a more selective and tightly managed study-to-work pathway (IRCC, 2024a). Since 2024, however, federal policy has shifted from expansion and diversification toward control, integrity, and sustainability. In January 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) introduced a national cap on new study permit applications and required most postsecondary applicants to submit a provincial or territorial attestation letter, while exempting

master's and doctoral students from that initial cap (IRCC, 2024a). Subsequent federal measures extended the cap, strengthened compliance obligations for institutions, and increasingly framed temporary residence through the language of community capacity, system integrity, and sustainable volumes (IRCC, 2024b, 2024c, 2025). As of January 1, 2026, however, master's and doctoral students enrolled at public designated learning institutions were again exempted from the PAL/TAL requirement (IRCC, 2025a).

The 2026 House of Commons Standing Committee report is especially useful because it makes this policy turn legible as a governance problem rather than merely an administrative adjustment. The report argues that the system had become unsustainable, notes the steep rise in study permits over the past decade, and emphasises that responsibility is shared across levels of government: the federal government controls entry and program integrity, while provinces shape tuition levels, institutional funding conditions, and DLI oversight (House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2026). Its recommendations are equally revealing. They call for clearer housing and support expectations, stronger DLI audits and penalties, more extensive consultation with provinces and territories, and greater deference to provinces on labour-market needs when determining which study programs should be eligible for post-graduation work permits (House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2026). In effect, the parliamentary response does not simply regulate student entry; it further institutionalises a policy logic in which international students are filtered through integrity, capacity, and labour-market criteria.

Ontario's policy response illustrates how provincial governments translate federal reforms into institutional governance. In March 2024, Ontario announced that it would allocate 96 per cent of its attestation-backed study permit applications to publicly assisted colleges and

universities, with the remaining four per cent going to other approved institutions (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities [MCU], 2024a). By January 2025, the province stated that it would continue allocating applications in ways that prioritise public postsecondary programs preparing graduates for in-demand jobs that support Ontario's labour market (MCU, 2025). This is an important reframing. It suggests that, at the provincial level, international students are valued not simply as fee-paying enrolments, but as future labour supply whose legitimacy is increasingly measured through employability, sectoral need, and provincial economic priorities.

Ontario's management of public college-private partnerships further reveals the tensions between student experience, institutional finance, and regulatory oversight. The province's 2023 Minister's Binding Policy Directive states that such partnerships should both support a high-quality international student experience and help public colleges remain financially competitive, with partnership revenues used to support core institutional business in local communities (MCU, 2023). At the same time, the directive requires ethical recruitment practices, consultation with local communities about their capacity to welcome international students, and limits on partnership-related international enrolment (MCU, 2023). Only months later, however, Ontario announced a moratorium on new public college-private partnerships while it worked to strengthen oversight and protect students through improved system integrity measures (MCU, 2024b). These policies suggest that Ontario is attempting to manage a contradiction that has become central to Canadian international education: institutions have relied on international student growth as a financial strategy, even as that growth has exposed weaknesses in housing, student support, and accountability structures (see also Gupta & Su, 2023; Sabzalieva, 2021).

Taken together, these federal and provincial policies show that international students are not governed through a single discourse of welcome. Rather, they are simultaneously framed as

economic contributors, prospective permanent residents, temporary migrants, institutional revenue sources, and potential pressures on local infrastructure. This unstable policy positioning is especially relevant for queer international students, whose access to safety, support, belonging, and future planning is already mediated by intersecting forms of precarity. Immigration governance and education policy are therefore not merely background conditions to their lives; they are central to how their educational possibilities and everyday vulnerabilities are structured.

2.2.4 International Students and Immigration

Beyond formal policy, international students are also positioned through public discourse, anti-immigrant sentiment, and everyday experiences of xenophobia. In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau declared multiculturalism an official policy of the Canadian government, marking it as the world's first such national initiative (1971 Pierre Elliott Trudeau Multiculturalism, 1971). This policy was introduced to acknowledge and celebrate the role of cultural diversity and multicultural citizenship in enriching Canadian society (Prime Minister of Canada, 2021). However, despite Canada's strong multicultural identity and generally welcoming stance toward immigrants, anti-immigrant sentiments still persist and manifest through various channels, including political platforms and public opinions. For instance, the People's Party of Canada has advocated for radical reforms to the country's immigration system, although it has not yet gained significant traction with the electorate or in Parliament (Colonescu & Wagner, 2022).

High-profile xenophobic attacks in Canada (Esses & Hamilton, 2021) have raised concerns about a resurgence in anti-immigrant feelings, demonstrating how hostility can surface. Tragically, one example is the 2021 London, Ontario, attack that was described by then-Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, as a terrorist act targeting a Muslim family (Tasker, 2021). Two

parents, two children, and a grandmother were on an evening walk when the driver of the truck intentionally struck them at an intersection in London, Ontario (Gillies, 2021), killing four of them. As far as xenophobia on university campuses is concerned, Forbes-Mewett and McCulloch (2016) noted a significant lack of research on the intersection of international students and crime, with an even greater absence in studies addressing violence targeting female international students. For example, a 17-year-old Sikh student was assaulted with pepper spray at a bus stop in Kelowna (Kulkarni, 2023). Similarly, another Sikh international student in British Columbia was allegedly punched, kicked, and had his turban torn off by a group at a bus stop (Strachan, 2023). In another recent incident of racial hostility, a white man who repeatedly hurled racial slurs at people of colour on a bus in Sydney, Nova Scotia, has been banned from Transit Cape Breton (Cameron, 2023).

Research shows a mixed response towards immigrants among the Canadian populace (e.g., Kymlicka, 2021). Until 2021, a significant number of Canadians express support for immigration (Cecco, 2020; Samy et al., 2021), acknowledging that immigrants contribute valuable skills, hard work, diligence, and loyalty that will enhance the security and prosperity of future generations. However, research tracking long-term trends in Canadian public opinion shows a sharp uptick in anti-immigration sentiment in 2023–24 with the proportion of Canadians strongly agreeing that Canada has “too much immigration,” roughly doubling since 2015, and “Canadians’ support for immigration levels decreased to a low not seen in 30 years” (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 2025, para. 2).

This shift represents the most pronounced rise in anti-immigration attitudes in decades, and it is evident across multiple demographic groups (Besco & Goel, 2025). In a complex landscape where the majority upheld the values of diversity and inclusion (Cecco, 2020),

significant work remains to address and mitigate growing xenophobic attitudes (Snagovsky et al., 2025) that can undermine these values. Snagovsky et al. (2025) further highlight how perceptions of demographic change can activate white identity among Canadians, potentially shaping exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants and diversity.

Additionally, multicultural and immigration policy implementation has often been inconsistent across provinces and territories (Yan et al., 2010), leading to a patchwork of protection that varies widely in effectiveness. These issues highlight the ongoing need for robust enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and sustained commitment to the principles of diversity and inclusion (Mirchandani & Bromfield, 2021) at all levels of government and society.

One of the significant ways to achieve anti-discrimination goals is through education (Hussain, 2023), promoting inclusive culture on campuses and beyond, although current efforts by educational institutions do not seem enough. International students often select Canada as their study destination, influenced by its positive immigration policies (Al-Haque, 2019) and the perceived treatment immigrants receive in Canada (Kymlicka, 2021), both of which significantly impact the decisions of international students (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018).

The correlation between the treatment of immigrants by Canadian society and international students' preferences highlights how national approaches to immigration directly affect educational migration trends. Yet, in the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the challenges faced by international students. Calder et al. (2016) administered surveys and held interviews with graduate students, university personnel, and service providers to understand the difficulties that exist for international students. They identified issues including housing, finances, finding employment, currency fluctuations, and adjusting to a new university and unfamiliar space (Calder et al., 2016). Such issues have only increased over time, as highlighted

by Khalsa Aid Canada in 2024 that shared “it was receiving five calls a week from international students in Brampton needing food, clothing and a place to live” (Bhugra, 2024 para. 1).

Bascaramurty et al. (2021) discussed the pitfalls of Canadian migration specific to Indian students. Since India is home to a growing middle-class population with high English proficiency, it has been one of Canada's top sources of international students (VanderKlippe, 2019). However, as per a report by Better Dwelling, in 2023 there was a 41% drop in the number of international students from India applying to pursue postsecondary education in Canada (Singer, 2024). I cite the challenges faced by international students and the media coverage of them as significant reasons for this drop. A piece of evidence of how serious these challenges are is a funeral home in Brampton reporting a distressing trend, indicating it handles the deaths of four to five international students each month, almost all of these deaths are believed to be either suicides or overdoses (Bascaramurty et al., 2021).

Attributing at least partial responsibility to neoliberal policies for the problems described above, the lack of government support for postsecondary education in Canada over the past decade has compelled many colleges and universities to bridge the funding gap by recruiting international students (Neatby & Yogesh, 2017), who often pay tuition fees up to four times higher than those paid by domestic students (Bascaramurty et al., 2021). Unfortunately, queer international students were not even mentioned as being particularly vulnerable.

2.2.5 Queer Identity

The exploration of queer identity is crucial to understanding the nuanced experiences of international students in small Ontario cities. Queer identity is inherently multifaceted and dynamic, encompassing a broad spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities (Butler, 1990; Forstie, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Rich, 2003). For queer international students, this identity

work becomes more complex because it unfolds not only through sexuality and gender, but also through migration, cultural adaptation, and life in places where queer visibility and support may be limited (Brown-Saracino, 2015; Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022; Sorgen & Rogers, 2020). In small-city contexts, where anonymity may be reduced and queer infrastructure thinner, questions of visibility, safety, and recognition can take on particular significance (Brown-Saracino, 2015; Hulko & Hovanes, 2017; Sorgen & Rogers, 2020).

Scholars have long emphasised that queer identity should not be understood as fixed or self-evident, but as something actively constructed and negotiated within specific social, cultural, and geographical contexts (Butler, 1990; Gray, 2009; McLean, 2007; Rich, 2003). Butler's (1990) argument that identity is shaped through repeated social performances remains influential because it draws attention to the ways norms structure what forms of self-expression become intelligible, acceptable, or risky. In practice, this means that queer identity is shaped not only by personal self-understanding, but also by the legal frameworks, public attitudes, and cultural norms within which individuals live (Fox & Warber, 2015; Watson & Ratna, 2011). For international students, these dynamics are further complicated by the fact that identity negotiation occurs in relation to a foreign educational system, new social expectations, and often unfamiliar local cultures (Mnouer, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2017). Educational institutions are therefore not neutral spaces in which queer identity simply unfolds; they are active sites in which recognition, misrecognition, belonging, and exclusion are produced.

A recurring theme in the literature is that disclosure is rarely a singular or final act. Rather than "coming out" once and for all, queer students often make ongoing decisions about when, where, and to whom it is possible, desirable, or safe to be visible. Scholarship on queer students' campus lives shows that being "out" does not eliminate the need for negotiation; it can

instead introduce new forms of labour, including correcting assumptions, managing names and pronouns, deciding whether to challenge microaggressions, and calibrating self-presentation in relation to perceived safety (Huot & Rudman, 2011; Zaidi & Chaar, 2020). For queer international students, these decisions can be especially complex because the relevant audiences are multiple and not always aligned. Students may navigate disclosure differently with family members back home, co-national or diasporic peers, white Canadian classmates, queer peers, faculty and staff, and employers, each context carrying distinct expectations, risks, and possible consequences (Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022; Valosik, 2015).

These negotiations also extend beyond the immediate campus environment. Queer international students often remain embedded in transnational family and community networks that continue to shape what becomes speakable or visible even while living in Canada. Chatterjee (2023) shows that queer international students' identity negotiations may continue to be mediated by social media, transnational communication, and concerns about family reactions, while other scholarship similarly suggests that the possibility of return to home-country contexts can shape how students manage disclosure and belonging abroad (Choi, 2022; Taylor et al., 2020). The significance of studying queer identity in this way is that it unsettles any simple narrative in which migration to Canada automatically produces freedom or authenticity. Instead, the literature suggests that queer identity for international students is often lived through partial visibility, strategic silence, and context-specific forms of expression.

The literature also suggests that queer identity is shaped by the availability and fit of support. Patrick's (2014) work with international queer students in Toronto indicates that participants often associated Canada with greater possibilities for queer self-expression and with more hopeful personal futures. At the same time, more recent scholarship cautions that queer

international students are still frequently under-recognised within campus services and broader higher education research, with sexuality and gender often separated from international student support structures (Campbell et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2022). In this sense, queer identity is not only a matter of personal self-definition. It is also affected by whether students can access affirming relationships, see themselves reflected in institutional supports, and participate in local communities without feeling erased, exoticised, or unsafe. In small-city settings, where resources may be fewer and social visibility heightened, these questions become even more pressing.

The scholarship in this section underscores queer identity as negotiated, relational, and context-dependent. For queer international students in small Ontario cities, identity is shaped by the intersection of sexuality and gender with migration, cultural expectations, institutional climates, and the local conditions of place. Visibility, recognition, and disclosure therefore emerge not as one-time achievements, but as ongoing practices through which students attempt to secure safety, belonging, and continuity in their everyday lives.

2.2.6 Layers of Marginalisation Within Queer Students

Countries in the Global North have been expanding their focus on queer concerns within higher education, with emphasis being placed on both theoretical frameworks and practical applications (e.g., Pineda & Mishra, 2023). The discussion of diversity in academic literature began in the United States and Canada during the mid-1970s (Bloemraad, 2012), primarily focusing on race and gender issues. In contrast, other English-speaking countries started to significantly engage with diversity topics around the mid-2000s, when terms like inclusion, gender, ethnicity, and cultural diversity became prevalent in discussions (Pineda & Mishra, 2023). International students form a significant section of the student population in postsecondary institutions, some of whom are queer. These realities call for the need for more

nuanced higher education research, particularly around intersectional concerns of international students who identify as queer.

Existing research on the experiences of queer students in Canadian universities highlights that many queer youths face verbal and physical abuse at school because of their sexual orientation, not only in the U.S. (Ryan & Rivers, 2003; Thoreson, 2016) but also in Canada (Haig, 2020). Verbal harassment and bullying are the most common forms of harassment, while incidents of anti-LGBT graffiti and students harassing queer teachers also occur (Flanagan, 2023; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Libraries across the country have also been targeted by harassment and threats for hosting drag story time events (Montpetit, 2022; Nicholls, 2024). Florida's '*Don't Say Gay*' bill (The Associated Press, 2022) and Alberta's Education Amendment Act, SA 2024, c 14, formerly Bill 27 (Egale Canada, 2025) are examples of state attacks on queer rights. A Fifth Estate documentary, *The Shadow War on Libraries*, which aired in February 2025, explores how an American-inspired, socially conservative movement has targeted public libraries and school boards in Alberta to roll back 2SLGBTQ+ rights and remove books from public access. The episode traces the influence of U.S-based "parents' rights" activism on Canadian communities, including the town of Valleyview, showing how groups mobilize to challenge and ban books dealing with gender identity, sexuality, race, and LGBTQ+ themes under the guise of protecting children (Kelley et al., 2025). Courtships of this movement have led to increased book-challenge campaigns, direct political pressure on library governance, and social tensions in towns like Valleyview, where inclusive library collections have become flashpoints for clashes over intellectual freedom and 2SLGBTQ+ visibility.

Building on the documented climate of hostility outlined above, it is unsurprising that the politicisation of queer identities has intensified the vulnerability of sexual-and gender-minority

youth. As provincial governments, most notably Alberta's United Conservative Party, have enacted or proposed legislation that restricts classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., Government of Alberta, 2024), these policy moves function as "signaling devices" that legitimate and amplify existing social stigma against queer youth (Sinno et al., 2025), such as peer-based bullying and identity-based harassment (Wike et al., 2022). Consistent with minority stress theory, such state-level discourses do not merely shape public opinion; they materialize in everyday school environments as heightened peer victimisation. Indeed, political attacks on queerness in education have been empirically linked to elevated rates of gender- and sexuality-based bullying (Maine et al., 2025). Jadva et al.'s (2023) national study of Canadian LGBT adolescents corroborates this pathway: youth who reported school-related homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic harassment exhibited dramatically elevated odds of self-harm (65.3 %), suicidal ideation (73.8 %), and suicide attempts (25.7 %). Taken together, the evidence indicates that macro-level political projects targeting queer visibility translate directly into micro-level harms, sustaining a cycle of minority stress that compromises the mental health and educational trajectories of 2SLGBTQ+ students.

Beyond overt discrimination and bullying, there exist forms of microaggressions against marginalised individuals at the intersection of identities, including sexual and racial ones (Dimberg et al., 2021). McCabe et al. (2012) investigated the use of derogatory phrases like "That's so gay" among educators and university students in the U.S., revealing that such phrases are not only prevalent but significantly affect students' feelings of inclusion and well-being. Exposure to such language correlates with negative outcomes such as feeling left out, increased headaches, and eating issues among queer students, emphasizing the need for educational institutions to create more welcoming and inclusive environments (McCabe et al., 2012).

Similarly, Houshmand et al. (2014) explored the experiences of racial microaggressions among Asian international students. These microaggressions encompassed exclusion and avoidance, mockery of accents, being disregarded, disrespect for their values and needs, insults to their intelligence, and structural obstacles such as difficulty acquiring funding, visas, and permits.

Dimberg et al. (2021) pinpointed four primary themes of microaggressions experienced by queer women at Canadian universities, including: facing scepticism as a response to sexual orientation; living with surveillance as a response to gender presentation; encountering heteronormative assumptions; and experiencing vulnerability. Participants in Dimberg et al. (2021) shared personal anecdotes that illuminate those themes, including how societal expectations around gender and appearance influence perceptions. For example, a participant named Burgundy faced assumptions and inappropriate suggestions at social gatherings due to her femme appearance, while Teal noted a shift in how peers perceived her sexual orientation after adopting a more stereotypically "queer" look. This pattern of doubt and the need for queer individuals to constantly validate their identities to others not only highlights a lack of understanding and acceptance but also contributes to a broader environment of exclusion and pressure within the university setting. Perceived discrimination can lead to increased depressive symptoms, a higher risk of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and heightened emotional distress, as demonstrated by Jadva et al. (2023). Physical and sexual assaults are also not uncommon (Namaste et al., 2021), but many victims choose not to report them due to safety concerns.

Apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Carter & Janes, 2018; Flanders et al., 2019; Munro et al., 2019; Sethi & Williams, 2016), most studies on microaggressions in Canada have centred around racial issues (e.g., Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Clark, et al., 2014; Poolokasingham et al., 2014). However, research focusing on microaggressions at the intersection of identities,

such as those experienced by queer international students, remains scarce. The analysis of scholarship on the experiences of queer students and racial minorities indicates the need to specifically examine the barriers that international students tend to face and, more specifically, the unique situation of queer international students studying in Canadian postsecondary institutions.

2.2.7 Queer International Students

Factors such as nationality, ethnicity, and cultural background intersect with queer identity, shaping queer international students' experiences in nuanced ways (Cerezo et al., 2020; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Assaults on queer rights within Canada (Boynton, 2023) and globally (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024; Shaw, 2023) have further exacerbated the challenges faced by these students, who are already susceptible to social, political, and educational challenges (Trager, 2022). Within Canadian higher education, queer international students occupy a particularly complex and vulnerable position (Campbell et al., 2024). While Canada is often perceived as a progressive and inclusive destination for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals (Donahue & Wise, 2020), the experiences of queer international students are multifaceted (Jubas, 2018; Marshall, 2021) and influenced by intersecting identities, systemic inequalities, and neoliberal dynamics (Fournier et al., 2017).

Canada's legal protections for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, such as marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws (Egale Canada, 2021), may attract queer international students seeking a more accepting environment than their home countries (Lee et al., 2021). Sexual and gender minorities from repressive home countries often seek refuge in countries like Canada, known for its strong commitment to human rights (Choi, 2022; Gosine, 2012). Although Canadian legal protections are often framed as evidence of safety, Murray’s (2014) Toronto-based study of

SOGI refugee claimants shows that the refugee determination system itself can require a highly structured story of home, a "migration-to-liberation nation" narrative in which Canada is positioned as a liberating new home and the country of origin is rendered uniformly homo/transphobic (pp. 132–134). While refugee claimants occupy a different legal category than international students, Murray's analysis is useful here because it demonstrates how legal regimes can discipline what queer migrants are able to say about home, belonging, and safety, including through homonormative expectations of how SOGI identity should be narrated and recognized.

In her British Columbia-based study, Chatterjee (2023) found that international 2SLGBTQ+ students felt compelled to conceal their identities in their home countries due to stigma and discrimination and required specific mental health support to navigate the unique challenges they face. Living in Canada, they carry a constant fear of exposure to their home country's hostile environment, both during their stay and when they return. As one participant in a CBC report on international 2SLGBTQ students lamented, "It is extremely hard. Every time I have to visit my home country, there is a major identity crisis, and I have to constantly switch between who I am and who I have to pretend to be" (Chatterjee, 2023, para 3). Chatterjee illustrates with examples such as Nigeria's police raiding an apparent same-sex wedding, arresting more than 60 people, and Uganda charging a man for "aggravated homosexuality," an offense potentially punishable by death under national law. These cases reflect how religious doctrines, cultural norms emphasizing traditional family structures, and punitive legal frameworks can pressure students to suppress their authentic selves (Chatterjee, 2023). Consequently, even while living in Canada, international 2SLGBTQ+ students may adopt

alternate personas to protect themselves from exposure to their home country's hostile environment, both during their stay and upon return.

Further, the neoliberalisation of Canadian higher education introduces challenges for queer international students as universities prioritize revenue generation and marketisation (Changamire et al., 2022; Giroux, 2004; Poloma, 2017) over equity and inclusion (Marginson, 2016). Even queer campus groups fail to address the diverse identities and experiences of queer international students (Duran & Thach, 2018). Ecker et al. (2015) recommended that queer campus groups in universities should tailor their services to better support these students who may not have had the same level of support in their secondary education as their Canadian peers, thus helping them to adjust and feel more secure in their identities as they begin their higher education journeys. Identity-specific resources and the presence of supportive individuals are essential elements in the eradication of discrimination and victimisation, both of which can undermine the overall safety of individuals (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017; Goffnett et al., 2021). Shifting sexual identity and liberation relative to their home countries raises worries for some queer international students about returning home (Duran & Thach, 2018), poses challenges in forming close connections, and also suggests a lack of awareness of social and legal resources (Choi, 2022).

By contrast, however, Patrick (2014) found that international queer students from Toronto Metropolitan University had overall favourable experiences. She argues that students' sojourn in what they perceived as a more accepting cultural and political environment in Canada was associated with shifts in queer identity development, including changes in self-labelling practices and how participants understood sexual identity categories across cultural contexts. At the same time, participants' accounts suggest that increased possibilities for sexual expression

did not eliminate all constraints. Some remained selective about disclosure because elements of home-country stigma persisted through relationships with friends or family members. Patrick also notes that participants reframed their romantic and professional futures more optimistically within what they perceived as Canada's more accepting environment. She highlighted that openly queer faculty added to the sense of belonging. Because her study had a small number of participants and was conducted at a university in downtown Toronto, the results are not applicable to non-urban settings, reflecting only the context of that particular university.

Queer individuals are notably more prone to suffering from depression and anxiety with rates two to three times higher than those seen in heterosexual individuals (Kingsbury & Findlay, 2024; Safe Supportive Environments, 2024). Kingsbury and Findlay (2024) found that over a period of 12 months, 56% of 2SLGBTQ+ youth met the criteria for at least one mental health disorder compared with 29% of cisgender heterosexual youth. Similar discrepancies were found for major depression, generalised anxiety disorder, and suicidal thoughts (Kingsbury & Findlay, 2024). Such mental health challenges can significantly impact the experiences of marginalised groups in higher education settings (Jensen et al., 2023; King et al., 2020). Kingsbury and Findlay argue that the differences they found between 2SLGBTQ+ and straight youth are not fully explained by access to social support and negative social interactions. Some of the remaining differences may potentially be explained by the impact of unmeasured aspects of minority stress on 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

Along with minority stress, queer international students face another set of psychological challenges, such as language barriers, homesickness, and loneliness (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018), which can be exacerbated by financial difficulties, restrictive immigration policies, limited career opportunities, and cultural disparities (Gan & Forbes-Mewett, 2018). Queer

international students, embodying both queer and international identities, are especially vulnerable and face compounded risks (Valosik, 2015). However, the instrumentalisation of queer international students as revenue sources (Choudaha, 2017) overlooks their unique experiences and marginalises their needs within the academic environment (Campbell et al., 2024; Patrick, 2014).

As I have noted above, queer international students encounter a variety of challenges, from navigating a foreign educational landscape to dealing with social stigmatisation both from peers and sometimes faculty (e.g., Jubas, 2018; Marshall, 2021). The academic environment also often reflects a broader societal climate of cisheteronormativity (Mizzi & Star, 2019; Toledo & Ilchman, 2022), which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and discrimination. Even many domestic Canadian students experience discrimination on the basis of gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation within Canada's postsecondary institutions (Burczycka, 2020). Such discrimination can create a hostile environment for queer students, including international ones, leading to feelings of isolation, discrimination, and a lack of support (Patrick, 2014). These challenges include unfamiliarity with 2SLGBTQ+ terminology, difficulties in developing intimate relationships, lack of knowledge of resources, and legal issues (Toledo & Ilchman, 2022). Rather than reading this only as an individual deficit, Mohanty's (1988) critique of Western knowledge production suggests that globally circulating identity vocabularies can function as universalizing representational frames, where discourse is mistakenly treated as the social reality itself. Additionally, students often face difficulties related to cultural conflicts concerning their queer identities, such as fear of consequences after returning home (Chatterjee, 2023; Choi, 2022; Taylor et al., 2020). Such conflicts can affect their mental and emotional well-being, and even university resources and services, especially mental health and counselling

services, can fail to accommodate students' queer and international identities (Toledo & Ilchman, 2022).

2.2.8 Queer International Students in Small Cities

Most community resources for queer individuals are concentrated in large urban centres (Hulko, 2018), leaving small cities like Thunder Bay struggling to provide even basic support, such as gender-affirming medical care (Allan, 2023). While, as noted earlier, there is ongoing debate about what constitutes a "small city" (Bell & Jayne, 2006; Walmsley & Kading, 2018), where population size is often a key factor. Small cities in Canada serve as a unique backdrop for understanding the experiences of queer students (Hulko, 2018; Myrdahl, 2015). These cities offer a different cultural and social environment (Drolet & Teixeira, 2020) from large urban centres, which can shape the experiences of queer students in distinct ways (Giwa & Chaze, 2018; Hulko, 2018; Hulko & Hovanes, 2017). Moreover, the limited research on 2SLGBTQ+ experiences in small cities in Canada hinders the understanding of the broader social, political, and economic contexts for queer individuals in these communities.

Toronto-based work on SOGI refugee settlement suggests that feeling at home may be produced through access to particular micro-infrastructures rather than through national legal protections alone. Murray (2014) found that even in Toronto, participants often described home-like safety and acceptance as located in a limited set of spaces such as SOGI refugee support groups and LGBT-focused organizations, rather than in the nation in a generalized sense. This matters for a small-city analysis because if homing is mediated through site-specific infrastructures of queer support, then the thinner service ecology and reduced anonymity in small Ontario cities may further constrain where queer newcomers can safely disclose identity, build community, and experience belonging.

The limited availability of 2SLGBTQ+ resources (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Hulko & Hovanes, 2017; Paceley et al., 2016; Sorgen & Rogers, 2020), combined with a less visible queer community (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010) and heightened societal conservatism, can create environments where queer students may feel isolated, unsupported, and misunderstood (Hulko, 2018). Limited queer space in small cities (Chamberland 1993; Gieseking 2016; Hulko, 2018; Rothblum & Sablove 2014) can also have a direct negative effect on queer individuals (Oswald & Culton, 2003) in comparison to big cities where the availability of spaces such as gay clubs and cafes has been shown to have a positive influence on sexual identity expression (Pritchard et al., 2002; Valentine & Skelton, 2003). Studies indicate that the process of identity development and the ability to form community connections are significantly influenced by geographic settings (e.g., Gray, 2009; Poon & Saewyc, 2009); youth in small cities face distinct challenges navigating queer identities and experiences due to different logistical realities compared to their urban counterparts (Gray, 2009).

Queer communities in small cities often lack the visibility and established formal support networks found in larger urban centres (Grey et al., 2015), while formal groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and clubs play a greater role in terms of personal support for queer individuals than informal social networks of family and friends (DiFulvio, 2011; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Hollander, 2000; Taylor et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). The absence of robust queer communities can lead to feelings of isolation among queer students, who may struggle to find peers who share similar experiences and understandings (Hulko, 2018). Furthermore, the limited number of 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy and social groups can restrict students' opportunities to engage with their identities in a supportive environment (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Misgav & Hartal, 2019).

Big cities, such as Vancouver, have more queer-affirmative healthcare options as opposed to fewer healthcare providers who are trained in, or sensitive to, queer issues in small cities (Baker & Beagan, 2016), which can complicate access to mental and physical health services. Educational institutions in these regions may also lack the resources to provide adequate counselling and support services tailored to the needs of queer students and lack of leadership and resources may hamper teachers' desire to make education 2SLGBTQ-inclusive (CBC News, 2016)

Perceived acceptance and allyship of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals also can vary significantly between large and small cities (Brodyn & Ghaziani 2018; Mathers et al. 2018; Myers 2008; Stone 2009). In large cities, significant support from queer allies (non-queer members who claim to support queer members in a community) has been reported (Brodyn & Ghaziani 2018; Ghaziani 2011; Myers 2008), while Mathers et al. (2018) suggest that such allyship and support is nearly absent in small cities.

The unique challenges faced by queer individuals in small cities in Canada highlight a critical gap in current educational and social support systems, and queer international students with an added layer of marginalisation in such geographical locales are not even talked about. Analysing the experiences of queer individuals in small cities thus not only sheds light on their specific situations but also enhances our understanding of queer communities in larger urban areas, suburbs, and rural locations (Forstie, 2020). In the subsequent chapters in this study involving analysis of data and discussion, I further explore how these experiences intersect with the identities of international students and can broaden the comprehension of both international and queer student experiences across different environments. This holistic approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the diverse challenges and dynamics within these communities.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that queer international students' experiences cannot be adequately understood through single-issue frames (e.g., "queer inclusion" or "international student adjustment") or through assumptions that Canadian legal protections automatically translate into lived safety. Instead, scholarship points to a converging set of dynamics: intersecting forms of marginalisation (racism, xenophobia, cisheteronormativity, and gender policing), ongoing identity negotiation across contexts and audiences, and structural pressures produced by the neoliberalisation of higher education and migration governance. These patterns appear especially consequential in small-city contexts, where queer infrastructure is thinner, anonymity is limited, and community belonging is shaped by local social climates and resource availability (Hulko, 2018). It is within these gaps, and these place-specific conditions, that this study is positioned, using intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism to examine how queer international students navigate educational life, community life, and wellbeing in small Ontario cities.

2.3 Conclusion

First, queer international students in Canadian postsecondary contexts navigate complex and intersectional identities. The literature confirms that multiple axes of identity, including sexual orientation, gender identity, race, nationality, and migratory status, intersect to shape distinctive challenges and experiences that differ significantly from either queer domestic students or non-queer international students. This complexity necessitates analytical frameworks, such as intersectionality, neoliberalism and identity management theory, that attend to overlapping systems of power, marginalisation, and resilience.

Second, existing scholarship reveals persistent barriers faced by queer international students, including homophobia, transphobia, racism, xenophobia, and cisheteronormativity,

across familial, community, and institutional domains. These oppressive forces manifest in identity concealment, social isolation, academic marginalisation, and mental health disparities. Notably, these challenges are amplified in small urban and rural settings than large urban ones, where queer infrastructure and culturally relevant supports are often limited or inaccessible.

Third, the reviewed literature underscores the central role of family and cultural communities as both sources of support and sites of tension for queer international students. Conflicts between cultural loyalty and authentic identity expression often generate emotional labour and negotiation, while community acceptance varies widely based on intersecting cultural and religious values.

Fourth, institutional environments, including curricula, campus climate, faculty interactions, and student services, play pivotal roles in either affirming or undermining queer international students' experiences. While some positive interventions exist, substantial gaps in inclusive curricula, culturally responsive counselling, and proactive equity policies persist, further marginalizing this population within educational settings.

Finally, growing scholarship highlights the resilience, agency, and community-building efforts of queer international students, emphasizing their strategies of resistance, activism, and peer support. These aspects present critical points of intervention to foster inclusion and wellbeing.

These conclusions foreground the importance and urgency of dedicating focused scholarly and institutional attention to this population. My research addresses the identified gaps by centring queer international students in small Ontario cities, a context that remains underexplored, applying intersectional and narrative approaches to deepen understanding of how identity, place, and power converge to define their educational and social realities. The

theoretical framing and literature reviewed in this chapter establish the conceptual foundation for the methodology, analysis and discussion that follow. The next chapter outlines the narrative inquiry design used to explore the lived experiences of queer international students in small Ontario cities.

Chapter 3: Methods of Care: Narrative Inquiry, Reflexivity, and Co-construction in a Small-City Context

In this chapter, I outline the methodological framework that guided my study, which explores the lived experiences of queer international students in small cities in Ontario. I employed qualitative research informed by narrative inquiry, given that the questions that guided my research focus on experience. Reiterating them from the introduction chapter, I asked:

1) How does being queer shape the educational experiences and daily lives of queer international students in small cities in Ontario? 2) What institutional and community supports and barriers do these students encounter? 3) How do their experiences affect their sense of belonging and well-being?

My approach emphasises the centrality of storytelling as a means to understand lived experiences and the contexts in which they unfold (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through narrative inquiry, I foreground participants' voices and delve into their personal journeys, shedding light on the complex interplay between queer identity, cultural adaptation, and educational experiences within their small city contexts.

Much like any methodology, narrative inquiry has its flaws and benefits. It has been criticized for its methodological ambiguity and lack of standardized procedures, which can lead to inconsistent practices among researchers (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). However, I would argue that being flexible does not necessarily mean lacking in rigor. For example, Riessman (2008) outlines systematic approaches to narrative analysis, such as thematic, structural, and dialogic/performance analysis, which help establish rigor and consistency. For narrative analysis, I adapted an analysis framework from Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019), reflexive

thematic analysis, which is a flexible but systematic approach for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) across a qualitative dataset. Their framework outlines an iterative set of analytic phases, familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, developing candidate themes, reviewing and refining themes in relation to the dataset, defining and naming themes, and then writing up the analysis as an interpretive argument. In the reflexive version, themes are not treated as "emerging" automatically from the data; rather, they are actively constructed through the researcher's analytic decisions and theoretical commitments (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019). In my study, I used these phases to move from meaning-unit coding of interview excerpts to a set of higher-order interpretive themes, while staying attentive to the narrative structure of participants' accounts (e.g., before migration, arrival, early adjustment, and ongoing life-making) so that the resulting themes captured both what was said and how participants made sense of their experiences. Throughout this chapter, I enhance methodological clarity of my research by articulating the theoretical frameworks that guided the research, the data collection procedures, and the analysis processes that I employed.

In the next section, I begin by detailing the theoretical underpinnings and historical evolution of narrative inquiry, illustrating its alignment with constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. I then explain the rationale for selecting narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology for this study. Following the rationale, I present the criteria and strategies used to recruit participants, ensuring that their stories provide rich, contextualised insights. Finally, I outline the processes for data collection and analysis, emphasizing the ethical considerations and reflexive practices that underpin my research.

3.1 Research Design: Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry centres on understanding lived experiences through the stories

participants tell (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022), emphasizing the relational and contextual nature of human experiences; one argument supporting the use of narrative in educational research is that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives." From this perspective, engaging in narrative inquiry becomes a way of examining how people make meaning of their experiences. Thus, "the study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the way humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). This methodology is valuable in examining how people navigate their identities (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008) and trajectories as it prioritizes the voices of participants and the unique stories they tell about their daily lives and educational journeys (e.g., Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Patton, 2002). Informed by narrative inquiry, my research uncovers the complexities and intersections of identity, culture, and place to offer rich insights into queer international students' lived realities.

Since narrative inquiry is often critiqued for its dependence on participants’ memories and retrospective accounts, which can be unreliable or influenced by current circumstances (Riessman, 2008), critics suggest that such accounts may not accurately reflect past events. However, narrative researchers acknowledge the fluid nature of memory and argue that stories are not merely records of the past but are interpretations shaped by current perspectives and contexts. Freeman (2007) notes that this interpretive nature of narratives is a strength, as it provides insights into how individuals make sense of their experiences over time. Researchers can address this critique by triangulating data through multiple sources, such as observations (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) and comparing stories of different participants to identify recurring patterns while also respecting the uniqueness of individual experiences, to complement participants' narratives. Freeman (2007) highlights the importance of comparing stories across participants to deepen understanding and verify the consistency of key themes.

3.1.1 Historical Progression of Narrative Inquiry

The story of narrative inquiry as a research methodology begins with the foundational work of Connelly and Clandinin in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Inspired by Dewey's (1938/1986) theory of experience, they envisioned narrative as both the phenomenon under study and the method of inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This dual role of narrative was groundbreaking as it emphasised the inseparable connection between lived experience and the stories through which it is understood. Their early ideas culminated in the article, "Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), a highly cited work that expanded upon their initial exploration of narrative inquiry as a methodology and a lens for understanding experience.

Dewey's (1938/1986) concept of continuity, the idea that experiences are shaped by the past and extend into the future, became a cornerstone of their framework. For Connelly and Clandinin, teacher knowledge exemplified this principle, as it was deeply personal, practical, and embedded in practice. They explored how thinking narratively could illuminate the intricate relationship between knowledge and practice (Clandinin, 2022). Over the decades, their research (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, 2000; Clandinin, 2006, 2019, 2022; Connelly & Clandinin, 2012) not only formalised narrative inquiry as a robust methodology but also shaped its evolution across diverse academic fields.

The broader acceptance of narrative inquiry reflects a significant paradigm shift in social science research. In the early 20th century, social scientists largely adhered to a consensus about what constituted valid evidence and knowledge claims (Polkinghorne, 2007). However, the 1970s brought a reform movement under the banner of qualitative inquiry (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Scholars such as Geertz (1973), with his concept of thick description, and influential

figures like Denzin and Lincoln challenged the dominance of positivist paradigms. They argued for approaches that could capture the richness of human behaviour, culture, and meaning making.

This reform movement reflected a growing awareness that certain dimensions of personal and social life could not be adequately explored within traditional frameworks of evidence and validation (Polkinghorne, 2007). Narratives, as qualitative data, emerged as a transformative force in this context. Groundbreaking works by Greenwood and Levin (2007) and Patton (2002) underscored the value of personal stories and interviews in capturing the depth and complexity of human experiences. Connelly and Clandinin's (2000) three-dimensional framework for narrative inquiry exemplifies this naturalistic perspective. The temporal dimension, rooted in Dewey's ideas about continuity, recognises that experiences unfold over time, shaped by the past and extending into future possibilities. The personal/existential dimension emphasises the relational and subjective nature of experience, highlighting the interplay between individuals' inner worlds and their social environments. Finally, the dimension of place underscores the contextuality of knowledge, illustrating how specific, meaningful settings influence the stories we live and tell.

These dimensions encapsulate the essence of naturalistic research: an appreciation for the interconnectedness, complexity, and contextuality of human life. By framing knowledge as temporal, interactive, and place-based, Connelly and Clandinin (2000) positioned narrative inquiry as a powerful methodological tool. Their approach not only respects the fluid and relational nature of knowledge but also challenges reductive, decontextualised interpretations, offering a means to bridge the universal and the personal, the abstract and the specific. Narrative inquiry continues to thrive, enriched by contributions from scholars such as Riessman

(2008) and Polkinghorne (1995) as well as scholars writing more recently (e.g., Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Kamali & Anderson, 2025; Tucker, 2024), all of whom have extended its applications to explore identity, meaning, and the richness of lived experiences across various disciplines.

3.1.2 Relevance and Philosophical Underpinnings

Narrative inquiry is underpinned by constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, emphasizing that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions and that reality is subjective, multifaceted, and context-dependent (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Ontologically, narrative inquiry aligns with the belief that reality is constructed through individual and collective experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Epistemologically, it recognises the researcher and participants as co-creators of knowledge with participants' stories serving as primary sources of data (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

I found these paradigms particularly well-suited for studying the lived experiences of queer international students, whose identities are often shaped by the interplay of personal histories, cultural norms, and social structures (e.g., Carolina et al., 2025). By adopting a narrative approach, I embraced the subjectivity and contextuality of participants' stories (e.g., McCormack, 2004), allowing for an in-depth exploration of how queer international students perceive and navigate their educational and daily lives in small Ontario cities. This approach also emphasises the ethical responsibility of representing participants' voices authentically and reflexively (e.g., Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022), ensuring their experiences are not reduced to generalised or stereotypical accounts.

Narrative inquiry is an ideal methodological framework for addressing the research questions of my study, as it enables a deep, contextualised understanding of how queer identity

influences the educational trajectories and daily lives of international students. By centring participants' stories, this approach provided me a way to explore how queer international students experience supports and barriers within educational institutions and local communities as well as how these experiences impact their sense of belonging and well-being. It served as a powerful methodological tool to explore various dimensions of participants' lived experiences, particularly in the context of education and identity. It also facilitated an understanding of how individuals shape their educational and daily experiences, allowing participants to articulate the intersections of their queer identities with their roles as international students. The narrative lens thus revealed both personal and systemic factors that influence these experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).

Consequently, queer international students' narratives provided critical insights into the supports and barriers they encountered highlighting how institutional and community resources, or their absence, impacted their ability to thrive in small Ontario cities. Through the act of storytelling, participants further reflected on how their experiences influence their emotional and psychological well-being, as well as their sense of belonging and connection to their communities (Riessman, 2008). By engaging with narratives, I uncovered the nuanced and relational aspects of identity, support systems, and well-being (e.g., Bauer et al., 2008) within specific sociocultural and geographical contexts of small Ontario cities. The alignment between narrative inquiry and my study's focus on nuanced, contextualised experiences enabled me to explore the intersection of queer identity, international student status, and life in small Ontario cities.

As noted earlier, narrative inquiry incorporates a temporal dimension, emphasizing the interconnectedness of participants' past, present, and anticipated futures (Clandinin & Rosiek,

2007). I examined how participants' past experiences, such as cultural upbringing, prior educational contexts, and personal identity formation, shape their current educational trajectories and daily lives as queer international students in small Ontario cities. In addition to capturing the present realities of participants' experiences, I explored their aspirations, hopes, and concerns for the future, particularly in relation to their sense of belonging, well-being, and professional or personal goals. This temporal focus aligns with my research questions by offering a comprehensive understanding of how queer identity evolves and interacts with educational and social experiences over time.

The geographical context of small cities in Canada also plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of queer international students. Narrative inquiry emphasises the importance of place in understanding lived experiences, recognizing that geographical, cultural, and social contexts profoundly influence participants' stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Small cities are distinct from larger urban centres in terms of population size, diversity, availability of 2SLGBTQ+ resources, and community dynamics (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Hulko & Hovanes, 2017; Paceley et al., 2016; Sorgen & Rogers, 2020). As stated in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I define a small city for the purposes of this research as one with a population of less than 150,000 people and limited resources for queer individuals, including 2SLGBTQ+ support groups, healthcare services, and community events.

I investigated how these unique characteristics shape participants' experiences within educational institutions and local communities. The spatial[2] dimension also explored how the relative isolation, limited access to queer-affirming spaces, or potential close-knit community

[2] My use of the term "spatial" is to denote a specific location shaped through human experience, culture, and emotional connection. In this sense, spaces become places when they acquire significance through interaction, memory, and social activity.

relationships in small cities, shaped participants' sense of belonging and well-being. By focusing on the interplay of these temporal and spatial dimensions, my research design offers a nuanced understanding of how queer identity and international student status intersect within the specific socio-cultural and geographical contexts of small Ontario cities.

3.2 Participants

Table 3.1 below provides an overview of the study participants, including their pseudonyms, home continents, fields of study, and self-identified gender and/or sexuality. This information contextualizes the diverse backgrounds represented in the sample.

Table 3.1

Overview of the study participants

No.	Pseudonym	Home Continent	Field of Study	Identify As
1	Mario	Central America	STEM	Gay
2	Juan	Southeast Asia	Management	Gay
3	Tenno	Central America	STEM	Bisexual
4	Preet	West Asia	STEM	Pansexual/Queer
5	Alex	North America	Social Sciences	Nonbinary, Aromantic, Asexual
6	Manav	South Asia	Management	Gay
7	Shanice	Caribbean	STEM	Bisexual
8	Wei	East Asia	STEM	Gay

9	Ravi	South Asia	STEM	Gay
10	Fatima	South Asia	STEM	Bisexual
11	Rahul	South Asia	STEM	Queer
12	Nox	North America	STEM	Bisexual
13	Carlos	South America	Social Sciences	Gay
14	Nora	East Asia	Social Sciences	Trans

Note. The table presents the demographic characteristics of the research participants. To enhance confidentiality, participants' home locations are reported at the continental level rather than by specific city or country. Similarly, academic affiliation is reported by a broad field of study instead of specific degree programs. Participants enrolled in Business and Management–related programs are categorised under *Management*; those in Engineering, Nursing, Science, Mathematics, and Psychology are grouped under *STEM*; and those in Arts and Social Sciences programs, including Education, Gender and Women's Studies, Social Justice Studies, and Political Science, are classified under *Social Sciences*.

3.2.1 Participant Selection Criteria

I focused on participants who met the following inclusion criteria:

1. Self-identify as queer (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, or any gender and sexual identities outside cisheteronormativity).
2. Currently enrolled in postsecondary institutions in a small Ontario city with a population of less than 150,000 people.
3. Has lived in Canada as an international student for a minimum of six months, to ensure adequate experience to reflect upon regarding their educational trajectories and daily

lives in their local contexts.

These criteria ensured that the study focuses on individuals who could provide rich, meaningful insights into how queer identity intersects with the international student experience in small cities.

3.2.2 Sampling Methodology and Recruitment Strategies

I used purposeful sampling (e.g., Suri, 2011) to identify participants who were able to provide rich, detailed narratives relevant to my study's focus. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research as it allows researchers to select participants based on their ability to contribute to a deeper understanding of the research problem (Patton, 2002; Staller, 2021). Specifically, criterion sampling, a subset of purposeful sampling, guided participant selection, ensuring that all participants met the established inclusion criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach aligns with the narrative inquiry methodology, as it seeks participants whose lived experiences are particularly suited to addressing the research questions. I also used snowball sampling. I requested early participants to recommend others who they thought might meet the criteria and be interested in participating. Out of fourteen, seven participants were recruited through snowballing, six were recruited through advertisements run on social media platforms, and one was recruited by directly reaching out through my own networks.

I used a combination of targeted and community-based outreach strategies to recruit participants. However, only social media advertisements and snowballing were major successes in recruitment. Finding participants was difficult despite my active efforts. I started the data collection process in February of 2025 and completed it the following June. Below I have outlined the strategies used:

1. **2SLGBTQ+ Networks:** I reached out to a few 2SLGBTQ+ organisations, support

groups, and community centres in small cities to share information about the study in the hope of reaching potential participants. However, I did not hear from anyone through this approach.

2. **University Pride Spaces:** I reached out to campus pride groups, 2SLGBTQ+ student organisations, and multicultural offices at postsecondary institutions in small cities via emails. I did not find any of my participants through this approach either.
3. **Online Platforms:** I used social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and dating apps like Grindr to promote the study in 2SLGBTQ+ and international student-focused groups. I found six participants from these platforms, one from personal networks and the remaining seven were recruited through snowballing.

Flyers, posters, and online announcements (see Appendix A) were shared in these various outreach spaces to invite participation. I provided details about the study, eligibility criteria, and contact information in the recruitment materials. Any potential participants who reached out to me were offered detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures.

3.2.3 Diversity of Perspectives

I recruited 14 participants for this study. That number is considered practical for doctoral-level qualitative research, as it allows for both depth and manageability of data (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2016). I aimed to ensure diversity across the following dimensions:

1. **Gender and/or Sexual Identity:** Participants include individuals who identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, non-binary, asexual, and gender-diverse identities.
2. **Nationality:** Participants represent a range of continents, including North America, South America, Central America, Southeast Asia, West Asia, South Asia, Caribbean,

and East Asia to capture the intersectional experiences of being queer and international in Canada.

3. **Educational Programs:** Participants from diverse fields of study broadly categorised as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), Management, and Social Sciences.
4. **Cities:** I disseminated the call for participants across universities located in small cities throughout Ontario. However, I was able to recruit participants from only two of them.

While I did not attain geographic representation across the province, ensuring diversity in the other areas nonetheless provided a comprehensive understanding of the varied supports, barriers, and lived experiences of queer international students in two small Ontario cities.

3.3 Data Collection

I employed the data collection methods consistent with the principles of narrative inquiry, emphasizing the co-construction of participants' stories in a manner that captures their lived experiences authentically. I engaged in narrative inquiry with 14 self-identifying queer international students' narratives through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that encouraged storytelling, reflective dialogue, and the co-construction of meaning between participants and myself as the researcher. They were invited to share their experiences in ways that allowed for flexibility and depth, ensuring that their unique perspectives were authentically represented. Data collection involved one meeting of 60 to 90 minutes with each participant. When permitted by the participants through their consent form, I sent the interview transcripts and/or the final narratives to them for their review. I also maintained field notes and a reflective journal to capture contextual details and my own personal reflexivity to ensure a robust and ethical engagement with participants' stories.

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to share their stories in their own words while also ensuring that key research questions are addressed (McArdle, 2018). Open-ended questions guided the interviews, prompting participants to reflect on their past, and present. See the detailed interview guide in Appendix B. My questions encouraged participants to reflect on their lived realities while allowing space for unanticipated insights.

3.3.2 Interview Tool

I drew upon my study's theoretical framework, combining neoliberalism, intersectionality and identity management theory, to devise my semi-structured interview tool. First, intersectionality shaped the protocol's consistent attention to how sexuality and gender are experienced with nationality, race/racialisation, culture, language, religion, and immigration status. Practically, this is why the interview tool includes a dedicated intersectionality section and a broader themes section and why many questions invite participants to locate experiences in specific contexts ("in this city," "in your program," "on campus," "back home") and to reflect on how different identity dimensions became salient in different settings. Second, identity management theory guided the inclusion and phrasing of questions that surface the *communication and strategy* work of everyday life, such as being out (or not) across different audiences, navigating spaces where queerness is not visible/accepted, and managing the privacy–visibility tension (e.g., selective disclosure, pronoun/name practices, and situational decisions about when to correct others). Third, neoliberalism oriented the protocol to the political-economic conditions shaping participants' lives as (international) students and migrants, prompting narratives about how and why Canada/small-city institutions were chosen,

how supports and barriers were encountered through university systems and local services, and how future orientation was structured by work, immigration policy uncertainty, and the responsibilising expectation to "cope" and self-manage. Importantly, I want to make clear that I did not ask participants to speak in theoretical terms; instead, the guide uses everyday prompts and follow-ups (e.g., "Can you give an example?" and "How did that make you feel?") that allowed participants' narratives to generate the material later interpreted through this framework and ultimately organised in the three-theme analysis structure in Chapter 4.

3.3.3 Contextual Considerations

The importance of creating safe, inclusive, and confidential spaces for conducting interviews was paramount, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic I explored. For in-person interviews, I used neutral and welcoming locations, such as my office at the university campus and an office space I created in my home. For participants who preferred virtual participation or reside in locations other than my city of residence, online interviews were conducted using Zoom, ensuring accessibility and privacy (e.g., Seitz, 2016).

Establishing trust and rapport with participants is essential for encouraging honest and meaningful dialogue (De Costa et al., 2021). To this end, I sent a participation information form (see Appendix C) to all the participants informing them about the confidentiality of their responses, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, I disclosed aspects of my own positionality, including my identity as a queer international student from India residing and studying in Thunder Bay. Developing rapport with participants functions not merely as a social courtesy but as a methodological prerequisite (Kim, 2015). Such reflexive disclosure facilitated trust-building and the creation of a safe and supportive environment, enabling participants to engage in open, authentic, and

nuanced discussions.

3.3.4 Audio Recording and Transcription

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent (see Appendix D), ensuring the accurate capture of their narratives for subsequent analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness and complexity of the participants' stories. Transcriptions include not only verbal responses but also significant pauses, laughter, or emotional expressions, as these elements provide additional context for understanding participants' experiences (Riessman, 2008). I manually transcribed the in-person interviews, while Zoom generated automatic transcripts for the interviews conducted online. Subsequently, I reviewed and edited all transcripts to ensure accuracy.

To protect participants' identities, I assigned pseudonyms during transcription, and identifying details were anonymised. As part of the anonymisation, I used the continents with pseudonyms as opposed to the countries, and I categorised their field of study broadly as STEM, Management, or Social Sciences. I asked my participants for their preferred pseudonym but 11 of them suggested that I assign one on my own. Three of them chose their pseudonyms for themselves. All audio recordings and transcripts are securely stored on an encrypted device and, after the dissertation is complete, an encrypted device will also be stored in a secure location, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and privacy regulations.

3.4 Data Analysis and Representation

To analyse the narrative data, I used a systematic and interpretive approach to identify themes, patterns, and significant moments in participants' stories. Rooted in the principles of narrative inquiry, the thematic narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Riessman, 2008) focused on understanding the complexity of participants' experiences and how these are shaped

by their queer identities, educational trajectories, and sense of belonging in small Ontario cities. The process included reading and re-reading interview transcripts to identify recurring themes, unique experiences, and pivotal moments that illuminated the research questions (Cope, 2010).

Some critics argue that narrative inquiry often focuses too narrowly on individual stories and fails to account for broader structural and systemic factors, such as power dynamics, social inequalities, and institutional influences (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). I addressed this critique by situating individual stories within larger social and cultural frameworks. Frank (2010) advocates for a socio-narratology approach, which examines how individual narratives interact with, resist, or reproduce dominant societal discourses. By analysing stories through a critical lens, narrative researchers can illuminate the connections between personal experiences and broader systemic issues.

3.4.1 Coding and Meaning-Making

First-Level Coding. The first stage of data analysis involved first-level coding, where I reviewed the interview transcripts and field notes to categorize data into broad themes that aligned with the study's research questions (Cope, 2010; Engler et al., 2021). Using a systematic, inductive approach, I discerned and assigned codes to segments of data representing recurring patterns or significant moments in participants' narratives. Initial categories included themes such as:

1. **Barriers:** Experiences of discrimination, isolation, or lack of resources within educational institutions and communities.
2. **Supports:** Peer networks, 2SLGBTQ+ campus resources, and affirming relationships with faculty or community members.
3. **Well-being:** Expressions of mental health, emotional resilience, or struggles with

belonging and identity.

The goal of this stage was to organise the data into meaningful clusters while retaining flexibility to accommodate themes that I discerned from data analysis (e.g., Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). This process relied on manual coding.

Second-Level Coding. Second-level coding involved a deeper, more interpretive analysis to uncover how the broad themes identified during first-level coding intersected with participants' queer identities and their educational experiences (Cope, 2010). This stage focused on exploring relationships between codes and identifying subthemes, such as:

1. How participants' queer identities influence their sense of safety and inclusion within educational settings.
2. The interplay between cultural expectations, nationality, and queer identity in shaping daily experiences.
3. Variations in support systems across different educational programs or institutional contexts.

By examining these intersections, I constructed a nuanced understanding of how queer identity mediates participants' experiences as international students in small Ontario cities. This process involved constant comparative thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2014), enabling the identification of unique and shared experiences across participants.

3.4.2 Thematic Narrative Analysis

I analysed the interview transcripts using a reflexive thematic analysis approach and thematic narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019), with attention to participants' narrative sequencing (pre-migration imaginaries, arrival, adjustment, and ongoing life-making). I coded the data in meaning units (typically 1–3 sentences capturing a single idea), and I

allowed co-coding when an excerpt worked across intersecting processes (e.g., when immigration/status uncertainty shaped emotional well-being or decisions about disclosure). To prevent “code creep,” I used exclusion rules that distinguished adjacent experiences (for example, I did not code general boredom or busyness as “mental health” unless participants described distress or impact). This method allowed me to focus on recurring themes across the narratives, such as how queer identity influences participants’ educational experiences, the supports and barriers encountered, and their impact on participants’ sense of belonging and well-being (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Initial coding produced a set of working codes capturing: (a) migration pathways and imaginaries of Canada alongside small-city realities (e.g., reasons for choosing Canada, small-city adjustment, immigration precarity, and home–Canada safety comparisons); (b) everyday queer life-making and conditional belonging (e.g., identity development, outness and family dynamics, strategic visibility management in physical/digital spaces, campus queer-space awareness/use, friendship/community formation, and dating constraints in a small city); and (c) institutional and racialised conditions shaping inclusion (e.g., racism/xenophobia, homophobia/transphobia, whiteness and “Canadianised” queer spaces, academic program climates, and the accessibility/fit of mental-health and other supports). These working codes were iteratively reviewed and clustered into the three interpretive themes presented in the analysis chapter: (1) Canada as imagined refuge vs small-city reality; (2) conditional belonging through strategic (in)visibility; and (3) whiteness as the default and the limits of “inclusive” spaces.

Thematic coding involved inductive and deductive approaches. Deductive coding aligned with my research questions and theoretical framework, while inductive coding allowed

new insights to emerge organically from the data (e.g., Nowell et al., 2017). The coding process was iterative, refining themes until they accurately reflect participants' experiences. Bradford et al. (2019) used thematic analysis on the similar topic of genderqueer narratives. Thematic narrative analysis was a relevant choice for Bradford et al. because it effectively captured the nuanced, subjective experiences of genderqueer individuals while situating their identities within broader cultural (North American) narratives. This method allowed Bradford et al. to explore the complexity and diversity of genderqueer identities, revealing how participants actively co-constructed their identities by navigating and resisting cisnormative and medicalised gender frameworks. I also followed this approach in my thematic narrative analysis. By emphasizing the role of language and the dynamic interplay between personal and societal narratives, thematic narrative analysis provided me with a rich, contextualised understanding of how queer individuals challenge and redefine hegemonic norms, making it uniquely suited to my study's aims.

3.4.3 Restorying

I drew on the socially constructed conceptual frameworks embedded within stories, recognizing that these stories are continuously created and re-created (e.g., Hu & Stahl, 2023). My approach involved not only examining narratives but also engaging in the processes of creating and re-creating stories to explore the meanings they provide about human existence (Weiss & Johnson-Koenke, 2023).

As a core aspect of narrative inquiry, I utilised restorying, which involves reconstructing participants' narratives into coherent and meaningful accounts while preserving their authenticity and individuality. This process includes organizing fragmented or non-linear accounts shared by participants into chronological or thematic sequences to highlight key

elements of their experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). For instance, participants' narratives were restructured to trace their journeys from arriving in Canada to achieving a sense of belonging in a small city, even if their stories were initially presented in a non-linear fashion. Wherever possible, I collaborated with participants to ensure that the reconstructed narratives accurately reflect their intentions and lived experiences.

3.4.4 Representation of Narratives

To honour the diversity of participants' experiences, I employed various methods to represent their narratives. These include:

- **Vignettes:** Short, vivid descriptions of significant moments or events in participants' lives, providing insight into their challenges and triumphs (e.g., Riessman, 2008).
- **Composite Narratives:** Synthesised accounts combining elements from multiple participants' stories to illustrate shared experiences while protecting individual identities (e.g., Willis, 2019).
- **Individual Narratives:** In-depth, personal accounts (in the form of block-style quotes) of participants whose stories highlight unique or particularly impactful experiences.

These various representational strategies ensured that the richness of participants' experiences was conveyed while addressing my study's research questions and theoretical framework.

Critics argue that researchers may impose their interpretations, potentially misrepresenting participants' experiences (e.g., Andrews et al., 2013). However, narrative inquiry emphasises researcher reflexivity and collaboration with participants. To address the ethical concerns related to misrepresentation, I engaged with participants, whenever possible, in member checking, asking participants to review and validate my interpretations (Chase, 2008). This process ensures that the representation of stories aligns with participants' intentions and

perspectives. Additionally, throughout this study, I was transparent about my positionality and how it might influence my interpretations (Riessman, 2008).

As noted, I either manually transcribed each interview or used the Zoom transcription tool and then reviewed and edited transcripts for accuracy. The revised transcript was then shared with the respective participant (if they agreed to review in the consent form) via a secure document sent by email. Participants were offered two weeks to review their transcript and provide any edits or clarifications. They could choose to rephrase statements, add context, or remove any content they were uncomfortable with. Two participants reviewed transcripts and eight participants reviewed the final narratives I used in this study. Only one of them made minor edits. This process ensured and enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by centring participants' voices in the final analysis.

3.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

I attended to trustworthiness throughout the design, data collection, analysis, and representation of this study. In qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness is often discussed in relation to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than seeking statistical generalizability, this narrative inquiry aimed to produce a rigorous, transparent, and contextually grounded account of queer international students' experiences in small cities in Ontario.

Credibility was supported through careful interviewing, rapport-building, accurate transcription, and participant review. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that credibility concerns whether findings are believable in relation to the data presented, and they identify strategies such as triangulation, checking interpretations with participants, and clarifying researcher biases as important ways of strengthening qualitative research. I conducted in-depth semi-structured

interviews in settings intended to be safe, inclusive, and confidential, and I disclosed aspects of my positionality as a queer international student to help build trust and support open dialogue. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy. Participants who opted to review their transcripts were given two weeks to suggest edits or clarifications. Two participants reviewed their transcripts, and one suggested a minor spelling correction. Participants were also given the opportunity to review the final narratives developed from their interviews. Eight participants opted in to review final narratives, five responded, and none requested changes. Participants were informed that I might contact them for clarification if needed; however, no follow-up clarification conversations were ultimately required.

Dependability and confirmability were supported through a systematic and well-documented analytic process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that consistency in qualitative research is strengthened when researchers explain the assumptions guiding the study, clarify how findings are derived from the data, and leave an audit trail of methods, procedures, and decision points; they also identify peer examination as a useful strategy for discussing the research process and tentative interpretations with others. I read and reread transcripts, coded the data in meaning units, refined codes iteratively, and developed higher-order themes through thematic narrative analysis. Throughout this process, I maintained field notes, a reflective journal, coding memos, and theme maps to document contextual observations, analytic decisions, and the development of interpretations. I also discussed coding decisions and theme development with my supervisor as the analysis progressed. These practices helped create a clear record of how the findings were developed and supported consistency between the data, the analytic process, and the final interpretations.

Reflexivity was central to confirmability. As a queer international student myself, I recognised that my positionality shaped both my engagement with participants and my interpretation of their narratives. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasise that because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, it is important to identify and monitor one's subjectivities and potential influences rather than assume they can be eliminated. Rather than claiming neutrality, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice to examine how my lived experience, commitments, and assumptions might influence the research process. This reflexive attention helped me remain accountable to participants' meanings while also being transparent about my role in knowledge production.

Transferability was strengthened through rich, thick description of the research context, participants, and methodological process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that rich, thick description helps readers determine the extent to which findings may be transferred to other contexts. I provided detailed accounts of the small-city Ontario context, participant selection criteria, recruitment strategies, interview procedures, and analytic approach. I also presented participant characteristics in a way that protected confidentiality while still conveying meaningful diversity across gender and/or sexuality, home region, field of study, and institutional context. This level of contextual detail allows readers to judge the relevance of the findings to other similar settings.

3.6 Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (ROMEO File No. 1470969) on February 20, 2025.

3.6.1 Informed Consent

In accordance with ethical research standards, I provided the participants with a clear

and comprehensive informed consent form before participating in the study (see Appendix D). This form outlines the purpose of the study, the research questions, the methods of data collection, and participants' rights. The consent form also explains that participation is voluntary and that participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. It also addresses the confidentiality and anonymity of participants' identities. Participants were encouraged to ask any questions about the study before signing the consent form, ensuring that they fully understand their involvement in the research. All participants were informed that they would be asked to share personal stories about their experiences as queer international students, and they were assured that they had the right to refuse to answer any question without penalty. They were also reminded of the importance of honesty and authenticity in sharing their experiences. The consent form was written in clear, accessible language, and participants were given a copy for their records (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.6.2 Confidentiality

To protect participants' privacy, I maintained confidentiality throughout the research process through several strategies. Pseudonyms were used for all participants in the research findings, and any identifying information (such as the names of institutions) were removed or anonymised. All data, including interview recordings and transcripts, are stored securely in password-protected files on encrypted devices. Throughout this dissertation, I have identified geographic location as somewhere in Ontario and I have not identified any specific university or academic discipline (see Table 3.1). After the study's completion, the data will be retained in an encrypted drive for the period of seven years required by Lakehead University policy and destroyed once that period has passed. This procedure is clearly outlined in the informed consent form, and participants are reassured that their confidentiality will be rigorously

protected (e.g., Haggerty, 2004).

3.6.3 Sensitive Topics

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in this study, particularly regarding participants' queer identities and personal challenges, I took extra care during the data collection process. In interviews, participants were encouraged to share their experiences in a safe, non-judgmental environment, and they were reminded that they were free to skip any questions or topics they were uncomfortable discussing. All participants were offered a list of queer-affirmative psychotherapists, emergency crisis helplines, and other relevant resources in their geographical location. These resources were provided before the interview, as well as at the conclusion of the session, to ensure participants were supported both during and after their participation. I sought to provide a safe, supportive space during the interview and was sensitive to participants' emotional states (e.g., Brayda & Boyce, 2014).

3.6.4 Researcher Reflexivity

As a queer international student myself, my positionality plays a significant role in how I approached the research process, including data collection and interpretation. I bring a lived experience of being a queer international student in a small Ontario city, which influenced how I related to participants and understood their experiences. Though I am a queer activist and an advocate for international students, I nonetheless made every effort to look at the transcripts from a neutral perspective. I sought to ensure that my personal investment in issues related to queer identity and the experiences of marginalised groups did not shape my interpretations of participants' narratives. In qualitative research, reflexivity is crucial to maintaining transparency and rigor, and I continuously reflected on how my background and biases could influence the data collection process (e.g., Finlay, 2002). I also maintained an open dialogue with

participants, inviting them to share their perspectives on the research process and ensuring that their voices were authentically represented. By acknowledging and reflecting on my positionality, I minimised potential biases as best as I could to ensure that the research remained as participant centred as possible (Berger, 2015).

3.7 Methodological Limitations

3.7.1 Challenges in Participant Recruitment

One of the key challenges I faced in this study was recruiting participants, particularly because queer international students in small cities may not openly identify as queer, especially in environments where 2SLGBTQ+ communities are less visible or less supportive (Brodyn & Ghaziani, 2018; Mathers et al., 2018). This population is often marginalised and may experience fear of discrimination or stigma, both within educational institutions and local communities (Myers, 2008; Stone, 2009). The decision to participate in a study that focuses on queer identity may be particularly sensitive for individuals who have not fully disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Some students may have hesitated because of concerns about privacy, confidentiality, or potential repercussions. As noted earlier, I implemented a variety of recruitment strategies, including outreach through 2SLGBTQ+ networks, pride spaces on university campuses, and online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, where potential participants could choose to engage with me anonymously before committing to participation. However, even with these strategies, participant recruitment was still slower than anticipated, and I could not recruit my initial target number of 15 participants in the timeframe allocated to the data collection phase of my study. Despite not having as many participants as I initially hoped, I was fortunate that I was able to still attract diverse participants in terms of the range of queer identities and

experiences represented.

3.7.2 Temporal Scope

The timing of data collection could also have influenced the findings. This study was conducted in a post-COVID recovery period, a time when both the global and local contexts of education have undergone significant shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread disruptions in education, including a shift to online learning, changes in student support services, and isolation due to physical distancing measures (Van Bavel et al., 2020). The pandemic and its aftermath have also reshaped the educational and social experiences of queer international students, particularly in small cities where resources for 2SLGBTQ+ students are even more limited. These disruptions might have influenced participants' sense of belonging, well-being, and overall educational trajectories. It was important to consider how these temporal factors may have shaped participants' narratives and how the post-pandemic context may have influenced participants' experiences, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings.

However, generalizability is neither my focus nor a primary concern for me. Narrative inquiry, my chosen methodology, does not focus on generalizability. Narrative inquiry seeks to generate rich, detailed understandings of human experiences rather than generalizable results. Critics argue that narrative inquiry relies heavily on personal stories, which are subjective and context-dependent, making it difficult to generalize findings to other populations or contexts (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006), but the goal is not to generalize but to contribute to broader understandings of human lives by situating stories within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). As far as validity is concerned, Polkinghorne (2007) argues that validity in narrative research can be established through coherent and compelling

arguments that connect the narrative to broader theoretical or practical frameworks.

3.8 Conclusion

My chosen methodological approach, narrative inquiry, is well-suited to capturing the complexity and richness of participants' lived experiences, allowing for a deep exploration of how queer international students navigate the intersections of identity, education, and community life in small Ontario cities.

Through semi-structured interviews, this study prioritised participants’ voices, enabling them to share their personal stories and experiences in their own words. This approach is particularly valuable in understanding the nuances of queer identity and its implications for students' educational and social lives. The use of purposeful sampling ensured that a diverse group of participants was selected, providing a range of perspectives from students across different genders, nationalities, and educational programs. Thematic narrative analysis allowed for the identification of recurring themes and patterns that emerged from participants' stories, while also honouring the uniqueness of each individual narrative through the process of restorying.

Despite the inherent challenges of recruiting participants from marginalised populations, this study sought, and seeks, to ensure that the voices of queer international students are heard and represented in a manner that reflects their diversity. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to the personal nature of the topics discussed, guided all stages of the research process. Additionally, my own positionality as a queer international student was acknowledged and managed through reflexivity, to ensure that researcher bias did not unduly influence the study's findings.

By employing a narrative inquiry approach, I sought to contribute to the understanding

of how queer identity shapes the experiences of international students, shedding light on the barriers and supports that influence their educational and social lives in small cities. The findings not only enhance scholarly discourse on queer students in higher education but also provide practical insights for institutions seeking to better support queer international students in navigating their academic and social environments. Ultimately, my research seeks to foster greater inclusivity and belonging for queer students in educational spaces, contributing to a broader understanding of the diverse factors that impact their well-being and success.

Chapter 4: Narratives of Imagined Refuge, Strategic (In)visibility, and Racialised Belonging

In this chapter, I present my study's findings through a thematic narrative analysis of 14 interview transcripts with queer international students living and studying in small Ontario cities. Guided by my research questions, I attend to how queerness shapes participants' educational experiences (e.g., classrooms, campus services, and student spaces) and everyday life in the city, including the supports and barriers that shape belonging and well-being. The analysis focuses on how participants make sense of: (1) moving to Canada with expectations of queer safety and possibility, and how those expectations are recalibrated through small-city realities; (2) living queer lives in small-city contexts where social worlds are tight, visible, and often predominantly white; and (3) navigating institutional environments (universities/colleges and local services) that can be simultaneously enabling and constraining. Throughout the chapter, I treat participants' accounts as both descriptive and interpretive: they document what happened, and they also show how participants explain, justify, contest, and narrate those experiences in relation to race, gender, sexuality, nationality, class, language, and immigration status.

The analytic approach follows Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis, adapted into a thematic narrative mode. In practice, this means I identify patterned meaning across the dataset (themes) while paying attention to how participants structure their stories, particularly the temporal arc that many accounts take (i.e., before migration, arrival, early adjustment, and ongoing life-making) and the way place enters their narratives as a shaping condition rather than a neutral backdrop. Rather than treating themes as categories that simply "contain" data, the chapter develops themes as interpretive claims about the social

processes participants describe: how safety is imagined and redefined; how belonging is negotiated through visibility and concealment; how whiteness and racialisation shape queer community; and how institutional infrastructures allocate support unevenly.

Two features of the dataset are especially important for interpreting the findings. First, participants repeatedly contrast "Canada" as an imagined national space (often represented through large urban centres and national reputation) with the realities of small-city life, where visibility can be both protective and risky and where the social and service infrastructures to support queer life can be thin. Second, participants rarely narrate queerness as a single-axis identity. Instead, queerness is described as being lived at the intersection of racialisation, accent and language, religious and cultural expectations, gender expression, and the legal/administrative constraints that accompany international student status. These intersections produce what many participants frame as a set of daily calculations about where it is safe to be seen, when it is worth correcting misgendering, how to disclose or withhold sexuality, and how to manage the risk that one's identity may travel across borders back to families and communities.

In presenting the findings, I use participants' own words to anchor interpretive claims and to preserve the texture of their meaning-making. All participant names are pseudonyms. Where necessary to protect confidentiality, identifying details are minimised while preserving the analytic integrity of the excerpts (for example, by avoiding unnecessary specificity about individuals or uniquely identifying incidents). Excerpts are presented to illustrate patterns that recur across the dataset; they are not offered as representative in a statistical sense but as evidence of shared processes and tensions that participants experienced in different ways depending on their positionality and context.

The chapter is organised around three themes: 1) imagined refuge → small-city recalibration, urban horizon, and conditional safety; 2) strategic (in)visibility, surveillance, embodiment, and transnational tether/return imaginaries; and 3) whiteness-structuring institutions + queer spaces, racialised exclusion, and a “double bind.” Together, these themes show how queer international students in small Ontario cities live in a paradox: rights and inclusion can be visible “on paper” and in institutional messaging, while daily life is shaped by exposure, racialised dynamics within and beyond queer communities, uneven institutional responsiveness, and the constant pressure of migration-related uncertainty. The chapter closes by synthesising how the themes collectively address the study’s research questions and by identifying the analytic implications of the findings for institutional practice and future research.

4.1 Theme 1: Canada as Imagined Refuge vs Small-city Reality

Across the dataset, “Canada” functions first as an imagined destination, an idea assembled through reputation, legal narratives of equality, media images of urban pride, and comparative geopolitical "common sense" (e.g., “Canada is safer than X”). Yet participants’ lived experiences are shaped less by “Canada” in the abstract than by specific small-city geographies. This produces a recurring narrative arc: participants arrive with an expectation of greater queer safety and social possibility, encounter the constraints and exposures of small-city life, and then recalibrate what “safety” and “freedom” can realistically mean in this context. Read through a neoliberal lens, this arc is shaped by the marketisation of international education and migration governance, where “Canada” is sold as an inclusive opportunity while the costs, risks, and administrative burdens of mobility are individualised and downloaded onto students.

Importantly, the interviews show how these imaginaries are co-produced in

conversation. In multiple transcripts, national politics and “rising hate” in Canada entered through conversation (e.g., examples about drag story time threats or municipal refusals to recognise pride). To that, Juan said, the rise in hate “makes me scared, because… I might [also] experience it” and Mario stated, “It gets me upset. It gets me angry… I hate that. I don't know why people, they just can't mind their own business because, for example, like you're all straight, nobody's bothering you.” Despite concerns about rising hate, participants’ responses still reveal a consistent pattern: rather than abandoning the “Canada as refuge” story, most rework it into a more conditional claim, Canada is “better than home” but not uniformly safe; protections exist, but daily life requires ongoing risk assessment; and small cities intensify visibility in ways that can feel both stabilising and dangerous.

4.1.1 Canada as a Comparative Promise: Rights, Stability, and Breathing Room

Participants commonly framed Canada as a place where queer life is more possible than at home, even when they did not describe Canada as perfectly safe. This promise is rarely absolute; it is comparative and relational, structured through contrasts with home-country taboos, family surveillance, criminalisation and stigma, and, especially, political volatility in the United States. Ravi, for example, explicitly named queer acceptance as a reason Canada “came” into his view as a desired destination for study: “people are more friendly, people are more open about… all LGBT people in general.” For him, the imagined difference is not only legal but social: Canada appears as a context with less everyday policing, less community surveillance, and fewer consequences for being known as queer.

Mario’s “Canada” is assembled through a similar comparative logic, but he narrates it as a blend of desire (for seasons, for novelty, for distance from suffocating climates and social controls), economic calculation, and geopolitical fear. He described choosing between the U.S.

and Canada, with Canada emerging as the safer and more manageable option:

> Well, my first two choices were USA and Canada. I always thought about Canada like a country that I wanted to go because it's a country that experiences all four seasons… and [my country] is basically just spring and summer… and also compared to USA, Canada is a little bit cheaper in a sense… and also I'm a little bit scared of something from USA… a lot of violence happens and the new politics and stuff. I always see like different documents and stuff that there are [in the USA] these people that got maybe catfish by [a] straight man and then beat up or getting killed.

The promise, in his story, is not simply "Canada is queer-friendly." It is "Canada is where a queer future feels survivable." He links this to what he has seen and heard about violence in the U.S., describing scenarios where queer people are harmed after being "catfish[ed]" (i.e., someone on the internet pretending to be someone they are not to attract a person) and assaulted. In this sense, Canada's imagined refuge is produced through a risk map: the U.S. appears as volatile and violent; the home country as suffocating and dangerous; and Canada as comparatively steady and safer, if not perfect.

Fatima's account similarly positioned Canada as a safer option, particularly in contrast to the U.S. She described feeling "safe" in not choosing the U.S. and connected that safety to the face of national politics there ("I don't wanna be… where Trump is the face"). Even while emphasising that Canada was not ideal nor fully her own choice, family circumstances, a scholarship, and affordability structured her pathway, and Canada appeared as a strategic compromise within a constrained set of options: a place where queerness can be lived more openly and with less immediate risk. She says:

> My mom wanted me to have a good education. And I got a scholarship here. I had no

> choice but to go to Canada. My mom… chose Canada. I just wanted to move out of my country. I applied to a few places, even in the USA, but the USA was getting too expensive, and Canada just helps, like it's just easier in Canada… to get PR [permanent residency] and everything.... I also don't wanna be in a country where Trump is the face. I do not want to be anywhere near that man. In Canada, I can definitely be more open because, like back home, only my sibling knows. And my friends know some of them. I can't be open to everyone. And so it's just safer here… [and] now I have a big community of cooler friends. I never had that before. I have a trans friend; I have seen them transition and it's beautiful.

Rahul's migration narrative makes this comparative logic explicit. He described choosing from countries with "good master's program as well as [being] easier to immigrate to," with Canada emerging through a mix of pragmatism and queerness. What matters in his framing is not that Canada is free of hostility but that it has "active actions," such as marriage rights and easier access to gender-affirming care relative to [home country]. In other words, Canada's promise is grounded in the existence of institutionalised protections that convert queer identity from a private liability into something that can be publicly lived, at least in principle. He said:

> One of the multiple criteria was kind of queer-friendly. Also, the country should be… in terms of global warming, Canada is the least impacted from global warming. That was one of the factors, considering Canada… I am very happy that I didn't choose America. I think bigots exist everywhere and they'll keep on yapping. But I want active actions - in Canada, like in terms of actions, there's laws that [queer] people can get married. Gender-affirming care is easier to access as compared to where I come from… Even

> here in Canada, people can say shit all the time. It does affect in some way…, but it's not actively harming.

For Nora, the promise of Canada was mediated by images of urban queer infrastructure. They made reference to “cities like Toronto with big pride events and established queer neighbourhoods,” and “government promotions” that produced an aspirational “Canada dream.” This dream is not only about safety from punishment but about liveability: the possibility of building a trans life that is materially and socially sustainable. Carlos’ narrative captures the same structure: Canada’s “reputation for 2SLGBTQ+ rights and protection” signalled a place where he could “finally breathe,” experiment with gender expression, and stop “constantly look[ing] over [his] shoulder.”

Alex, who, unlike the other participants, is from the U.S., also narrated Canada as preferable given “the way that things are currently going” back home. Although Alex emphasised that their move was driven primarily by program choice rather than a deliberate decision in relation to the state of their nation, their reluctance to return to the U.S. confirms the larger pattern I saw in the interviews: Canada is positioned as a comparatively safer horizon for queer life. Alex said:

> Maybe pre-election, I would have felt fine going back to the U.S., but currently with what's going on, I don't particularly want to go back there… It's good and bad to be in Canada… I love being me, but I don't like the way that other people see me and treat me. Canada is definitely better in comparison to what is happening in other countries but they definitely have a lot of work to do… It sucks to always be in that limbo of, like, are people going to be racist to me or are they gonna be transphobic to me? Or both. Particularly, in [this Canadian city], I get a lot of micro aggressions… People don't think

> that being asexual is real… a lot of people will try to convince me that I'm not asexual and then it starts to turn more into sexual harassment than I think they realize it does… Being unambiguously Black, I get a lot of microaggressions from that, of being told that I'm well-spoken or that I'm well dressed and that people are surprised [by that]. Because [it is perceived that] Black people usually aren't like that, , and then it becomes very obvious very quickly when I'm in certain spaces that I am the queer one or the Black one or that I am not a genuine part of that space.

These various accounts show that “Canada” operates as a symbolic refuge even when participants enter with pragmatic motives (scholarship, admission, cost, possible permanent residency). The refuge is not imagined as a paradise; rather, it is imagined as breathing space, where there is greater room to experiment, disclose, and build queer community without immediate fear of family retaliation, cultural shame, or overt institutional constraints.

4.1.2 Arrival and Disillusionment: Canada Becomes the Small Ontario City

While “Canada” is initially imagined as a national space, lived experience is mediated through local geography. Participants repeatedly described a shift from an abstract Canada to a very specific “Canada-here” with distinct limits on queer infrastructure, anonymity, and community.

Ravi’s story illustrates this pivot. Before arriving, he hoped for “other cities,” but his admission offer made [this small city] the available option. After arrival, he described a mismatch between his “picture of Canada” and the small-city reality: he expected to find more 2SLGBTQ+ community and social life but discovered that “the groups do exist, but it’s on a very smaller scale” and that he “couldn’t socialize” in the ways he anticipated. This is not merely disappointment; it is a recalibration of what queer life can look like when social

opportunities and community density are limited. He said:

> When I moved to Canada, my picture of Canada was very different. I thought it'll be like more people from my community and there will be more social circles, but I did not know that it would not be there in [this city]… The groups do exist, but it's on a very smaller scale and I couldn't socialize much with the people, which I thought I could before coming here. In other cities like Toronto, I think there are more social events like parties and stuff, like [queer people] just meet up in a cafe randomly. But I don't think that is there [in this city] or I'm not aware of [it].

Fatima's arrival narrative emphasised how little she understood about the city beyond rumours and fragments of information. She had heard about the murder rate and that the city was windy but "did not know anything else." That partial knowledge matters analytically, showing how institutional marketing (e.g., "inclusive campus," and "friendly community") and distant imaginaries can fill the gap when students cannot meaningfully anticipate what a small Ontario city might entail for queer life. There is also a neoliberal dynamic here: inclusion operates as a marketable promise within international student recruitment, while students are left to absorb the uneven realities of housing, community access, and everyday safety as individual "adjustment." As Fatima said:

> The queer scene here sucks… I can't really find anyone who I can talk to… [The] queer scene is so tiny… We are big fans of drag queens. And there's not enough drag queens. Like there's only one Black drag queen. And the rest of them are white, and there's no brown… drag queen, and they are not even making this a safe space… There's also racism. There's also a lot of racism like amongst them… when I went to drag shows, so many people. But then there's no unity, there is no community. Mostly white [people]

> there, [it] is like 90% white… So yes, it's so white-people driven, there is no colour, actually.

Mario's account complicates the "disillusionment" storyline by showing how smallness can be framed as both appealing and constraining, especially for someone describing social anxiety and a desire for gradual adjustment. He was aware that [this small city] was not Toronto, and initially welcomed that:

> Actually, I did like it because I'm an introvert with social anxiety, so I kind of like it that it is not that big… it seems a little bit more quiet. So, I like it for that.

But Mario also narrates small-city Canada as a transitional space, chosen in part because it felt manageable as a first encounter with the country. He explains that he wanted to "get a feel" for Canada in a small place before attempting the "big city," because large urban centres could be "a big shock" in terms of scale, social density, and unfamiliar infrastructures:

> I guess that's why I wanted to experience Canada and first, like a small town just to get a feel and get comfortable here and then be ready for the big city because I feel like big cities could be a big shock because there's a lot more people and different things and technology and stuff that I'm not used to. So, I think little by little. I might get more comfortable.

This "little by little" narrative is analytically important. It suggests that small-city settlement is not only an imposed constraint, but that it can also be narrated as a deliberate pacing of migration and queer life-making: starting where one can cope, then imagining a later move toward denser queer infrastructures.

Across these accounts, smallness is not simply a descriptive feature of place; it functions as a social technology that reorganises visibility, access, and risk. "Canada" becomes legible not

through national mythology but through everyday infrastructures: where one can go, who is present, what kinds of bodies are assumed to belong, and how quickly difference is noticed.

4.1.3 Recalibrating "Safety": Rights on Paper, Vulnerability in Practice

As noted above, after arrival, participants rarely abandoned the idea that Canada is safer than home. Instead, they rearticulated safety as conditional: legal protections matter, but they do not eliminate everyday forms of risk, hostility, or exhaustion. This recalibration often takes the form of a dual claim, which is that Canada is better than home, but it is not the safe haven that national reputation suggests, especially in small cities.

Ravi captured this logic clearly. When asked about rising anti-queer hostility in Canada, he responded that he still experiences Canada as "better than [my home country]" because [my home country] carries "taboo" and "social pressure" from "family, neighbours, anyone else." The key contrast is that, in Canada, he feels less socially constrained and less exposed to family surveillance. Safety, then, is not defined as the absence of hate; it is defined as reduced social coercion and increased personal autonomy. He said:

> I feel that it's better than [my home country] because in [my home country], there is this taboo or more like a social pressure, which I don't have here, I feel. There I am not out to my family. The thing is that in [my home country], they feel being gay or being bisexual is wrong or they feel having a same-gender relationship is incorrect because of their own belief. The trend is changing and people are now exploring more, but they are still not ready to accept that. But over here I feel like they have more acceptance. At least they are willing to understand compared to [my home country].

Mario's narrative articulates this conditional shelter in a slightly different key: he emphasises that he has not experienced direct violence personally, but his sense of safety has

been disrupted by learning about local anti-queer threats and by encountering everyday signs that hostility exists "here too." While talking about a bomb threat during a drag story time at a local public library, he described an affective rupture and anger, and then narrated his response as a moral critique rooted in his own history with coercion:

> Stuff like that gets me upset. It gets me angry. I love drag queens… So, I hate that. I don't know why people, they just can't mind their own business… Because people, I guess they think that being queer is like a choice… I experienced a lot of trauma and a lot of nasty stuff back home. So, I would never, ever choose to be queer if it was a choice because why would I experience all of that?

In narrative terms, this excerpt shows how "Canada-as-refuge" is not only challenged by information about local hostility; it is processed through a biographical archive of earlier violence and constraint. The bomb threat becomes intelligible not merely as a Canadian event, but as a reminder that queer life remains contestable, and that the need to justify one's existence ("it's not a choice") persists even after migration.

Fatima also offered a recalibration that spoke to her alarm. She described feeling "anger" when describing local anti-queer actions, precisely because Canada was imagined as "as safe [a] place." Her statement, "I would go back into the closet… identify as straight if anything happened," shows how quickly the imagined refuge can come to feel precarious when national politics or local hostility makes the situation feel unstable. Even when she described her own relative ability to "blend easily," the fear is not only personal; it is anticipatory and structural: a sense that safety is contingent on political direction and institutional response. While discussing bomb threats during drag story time where she lives in Ontario, she said:

> The country is progressing in reverse, but slowly… I just thought Canada would be a

> safe place… but that makes me concern. I'm very scared… how do you get out of this? I cannot think of a way that the situation can be prevented. Because it has been happening. It's not just a new thing. And if it has been happening, clearly no action has been taken… I would go back into the closet. I would identify as straight if anything happened, I would just identify as straight.

Across transcripts, then, the promise of Canada is not fully rejected but it is made more complex. Participants retain the comparative claim (Canada is "better than home"), but they revise the imagined refuge into a conditional shelter: one that provides meaningful rights and distance from family pressure, yet still requires ongoing negotiation of local hostility, social recognition, and place-specific constraints.

4.1.4 The "Urban Horizon": Big Cities as the Imagined Location of Full Queer Life

A further way participants managed the gap between national promise and local reality was by projecting "real queer Canada" onto large urban centres, most often Toronto, but also other metropolitan imaginaries. In the dataset, the big city functions as an "urban horizon," a future-oriented spatial solution where queer life is imagined as denser, less surveilled, and less organised around being the only queer person in the room. Importantly, this is not narrated as a simple preference for "bigger and better." It operates as a strategy for safety and belonging, an imagined elsewhere that contains what is missing locally (anonymity, multiple venues, wider dating pools, specialised healthcare, and a sense of being ordinary rather than exceptional).

Across accounts, participants contrast small Ontario cities with larger urban centres as spaces where visibility is diluted by scale. For example, Ravi frames this horizon as a question of social possibility, expecting "more… social events… parties… meet up in a cafe" in Toronto-like contexts, whereas in the small Ontario city where he lives, those networks feel thin

or hard to access. Fatima positions the horizon even more forcefully, describing the local queer scene as "tiny," constrained by scarcity and whiteness, and imagining larger cities as places where queer life is not constantly limited by the size and interacting with only the same social pool. Carlos similarly names the affective difference; in a big city, one can become "just one more queer person in a crowd," whereas in a small city, visibility becomes "a double-edged sword," amplifying exposure to gossip, judgment, and harassment. Nora's larger-city imaginaries add neighbourhoods with rainbow flags "in almost every window," multiple trans-competent clinics, and more routine public accommodation of trans life to produce a sense of liveability that feels spatially distant from small-city scarcity.

Manav articulates this big-city/small-city contrast most bluntly as differences in recognizability and circulation of information. His account frames the urban horizon as protection through social indifference; the city's scale makes it harder for queerness to become a spectacle. He explains,

> In Toronto, I noticed that nobody cares about nobody, kind of thing. Like, you could be just walking around buck naked, nobody would care. But [here], it's a small place. people notice. … everybody knows everybody, so anything you do, before you even get back home, everybody knows about [it].

In analytic terms, Manav's comment suggests the urban horizon as a privacy technology. Despite the implausibility that no one in big cities would notice public nakedness, the metropolitan "nobody cares" is not framed as coldness, but as a condition that reduces social risk for those whose identities are more costly when they become publicly legible.

At the same time, participants made clear that the urban horizon is unevenly accessible to them. Access to this "elsewhere" is constrained by the very conditions that structure small-

city life, namely, limited money, limited time, limited transport, and the practical labour of planning travel, which is often made heavier by not wanting to travel alone. This matters because a "move to a bigger city" is not a simple solution available to all; it is a resource-intensive future that can remain aspirational even when it feels necessary. Alex adds an additional complication by preferring smaller cities due to feeling anxious in large urban environments. This complication reinforces a key point: big-city imaginaries are powerful, but they are not universal, and they do not erase the fact that small-city ecologies produce uneven inclusion even for those who do not desire metropolitan life.

Analytically, the urban horizon allows participants to keep faith in the "Canada as refuge" narrative without denying small-city realities. Canada remains imagined as capable of queer life, but that capability is spatially concentrated elsewhere. The big city becomes a container for what is missing locally: dense community, anonymity, multiple venues, specialised healthcare, and the sense of being unexceptional.

To sum up, Theme 1 shows that participants do not experience "Canada" as a stable or uniform context. Canada is first imagined as a comparative refuge, safer than home, more rights-bearing, and more liveable for queer futures. After arrival, that national promise is remade through small-city realities: thin queer infrastructure; heightened recognizability; dominant whiteness in public and queer spaces; and the everyday effort required to manage risk. Many participants therefore shift from a straightforward "Canada is safe" story to a conditional claim: Canada is safer in law and in some social respects, but safety is uneven, local, and continuously negotiated.

The gap between imagined refuge and place-specific reality sets up the next theme: conditional belonging via strategic outness and visibility management. If Canada is not

uniformly safe, and if small cities make queerness more visible and legible, then the central everyday question becomes not only "Where do I belong?" but also "When and how can I be seen?"

4.2 Theme 2: Conditional Belonging Through Strategic (In)visibility

While Theme 1 traced how participants' expectations of "Canada" are recalibrated through small-city realities, Theme 2 shows the effects of such recalibration in everyday life. Across the transcripts, belonging is not described as a stable state achieved through arrival, legal protection, or simple "outness." Instead, participants narrate belonging as conditional, something negotiated through ongoing, often moment-by-moment, decisions about what to reveal, how to present oneself, and when to stay silent. These negotiations are not only about sexuality or gender identity in the abstract; they are embodied, spatialised, and relational.

Participants learn to manage visibility across specific settings (classrooms, workplaces, buses, residences, bars, campus centres), and across audiences (family back home, co-nationals, white Canadians, queer peers, staff). The result is a recurring practice of strategic (in)visibility: being "out" in some contexts while carefully regulating the signals (pronouns, clothing, voice, affect, disclosures) that might make queerness legible to others.

4.2.1 "Out, But Not Announcing": Disclosure as Controlled, Situational Practice

A central pattern that emerged from the interviews is that participants resist a binary framing of "closeted" versus "out." Instead, they describe disclosure as contingent, often framed as being honest if asked while avoiding proactive declaration. Rahul captured this as a deliberate stance when he asserted, "I don't try to hide it… But I don't start a conversation by saying I'm gay… if someone asks me, I won't be denying it." This is not simply cautiousness; it is an interactional strategy that limits exposure while maintaining integrity.

For instance, Juan's situation sharpens the central tension in this theme: that Canada enables forms of everyday couplehood that were structurally impossible at home (marriage recognition, cohabitation as a legitimate family form) while simultaneously producing new demands for visibility through public couplehood in a small city, through institutional paperwork that compels disclosure, and through ongoing "face" and family-name politics that travel transnationally.

Ravi articulated a similar approach but with a stronger emphasis on privacy and social benefit. He said, "I mostly try not to show visibly that I'm gay," adding, "I just feel like it is not something that everyone should know… I don't know what I will get in return for that so that's why I try to hide it mostly." Here, disclosure is framed as a cost–benefit calculation shaped by anticipated judgment and limited payoff, especially salient in a small-city environment where social information travels quickly and where the "audience" may be unpredictable.

For Carlos, disclosure remains partial even in Canada. He describes being able to "call myself gay out loud, but still not everywhere, and not to everyone." His narration shows how partial outness is structured not only by identity but by place. In a small city "people often know each other or notice newcomers easily." He added that, "being visibly queer can make you feel very watched." What looks like individual discretion is, in practice, a response to the social density of small communities.

Juan's narrative aligns with this pattern of controlled transparency but adds an important administrative layer: disclosure is not only interpersonal; it can be compelled by institutional processes (in his case, immigration/partnership documentation). He describes being "open" in Canada with trusted people, classmates and those close to him, while also emphasising how selective he had to be in his home country. He then narrated how his disclosure to his parents

was not a singular "coming out" moment but was a staged and carefully worded sequence shaped by the practical need to make his relationship legible to authorities:

> I'm very much open to the people who I am close with that they know … [my husband] … even the classmates now here, they know about my husband. … [In my home country] it was a different kind of situation because I wasn't open with … a lot of people … I was very selective … [W]hen we were moving here to Canada we had to justify that we are together … [and] because of that requirement … we made it a point to … [tell] our parents … I didn't come out to my parents, but I just mentioned that I'm moving to Canada and … I am moving with this person … And we've been together … [for] how many years now. So it was more like that … And then after, it took me like a few days to actually tell them [after moving to Canada] that we got married. So … it's not … easy.

This is disclosure as controlled speech-work: Juan is explicit that he did not deliver an identity statement ("mom I'm gay") but framed his relationship as a durable fact and shared future ("I am moving with this person… we've been together… years"). The sequence matters. It shows how "outness" can be built through incremental revelations, in this case designed to manage parental reaction, cultural scripts, and the emotional weight of disclosure.

For Nora, disclosure is not only about sexuality but about the governance of name and gender in institutional life. They describe "constantly gauging when it is safe to correct someone on my pronouns, when to use my chosen name versus my legal name on forms, and how much to explain to people who may have never knowingly met a trans man before." Their points make explicit how disclosure is not merely personal or interpersonal but built into bureaucratic routines.

Alex also describes situational disclosure, but, in terms of everyday micro-encounters, saying that "when I'm at the grocery store… I don't introduce myself with my pronouns, so nobody knows." When misgendering occurs, Alex notes how surprise and perceived risk can inhibit correction. "Sometimes I will get misgendered and… I won't say anything immediately… sometimes if it's just like somebody that I'm not going to see again, I won't say anything because… it feels unsafe." Such navigation illustrates that even in a "safe" national framing of queerness, disclosure remains governed by context, anticipated consequences, and the emotional labour of self-advocacy.

While some participants describe choosing silence to avoid risk, Nox shows the inverse dynamic, noting how repeated correction becomes its own form of labour, especially when recognition depends on others' willingness to learn.

> I've had a lot of passive homophobia… I work [on campus]. And my manager, he is a white Canadian straight guy. I repeatedly tell them my pronouns and then they just forget… I have a pin… a big pin that says, "they/them." [Manager] has never used them once unless I correct him… Every single time.

Nox illustrates how disclosure thus is not necessarily a one-time act but can be a repetitive institutional negotiation. Even when queerness is "known," belonging remains conditional on whether others treat correct naming and pronouns as optional rather than non-negotiable.

Fatima's narrative adds another dimension: selective outness is also a strategy for managing intra-community surveillance among co-nationals. Although she is out to queer friends and describes being able to "be more open" in Canada, she is explicit about the risks of wider disclosure within the [home-country] community: "it's just more risky if people [back home] find out… [E]veryone in the [queer] community knows… I already do so much [queer]

stuff… I just don't want the homophobia … so I just hide it sort of." Her choices highlight that "being in Canada" does not dissolve the power of diaspora networks; for many, belonging requires careful boundary-making between queer life and community belonging.

Across these accounts, disclosure emerges as a practice not of denial but of controlled transparency and calibrated openness. Participants craft an "outness repertoire" that protects them from unwanted attention while enabling connection in selected contexts.

4.2.2 The Body as a Site of Negotiation: Gender Expression, Legibility, and Queer Authenticity Tests

Participants describe how queerness is read through bodies, clothing, voice, posture, gestures, makeup, accessories, and look. As a result, belonging becomes tied to managing legibility, specifically when to appear readable as queer, when to soften visibility, and how to respond when others impose stereotypes about what queerness should look like.

Ravi's account shows this negotiation vividly. He described experimenting with makeup, "I wanted to try makeup and stuff… I did that in my room but… I didn't come out of the room," and linked this to fear of judgment even among people who already know he is gay. He pointed out that "my housemates know that I'm gay… but still you thought that this will probably be too much for them." He also described being "found out" through nonverbal cues, adding that "I have very little control on my body language so maybe using that, people find out that I'm gay." For Ravi, the body is simultaneously a site of potential freedom (trying makeup) and a site of risk (uncontrolled legibility).

Carlos describes a parallel dynamic, but located more in public space and everyday self-surveillance. He notes how even relatively mundane items become "too gay" under the gaze of the street. He said, "I think about what I'm wearing and whether my outfit looks 'too gay,' even

if it’s just slim jeans, a tote bag, and a slightly fitted jacket.” He described modifying his voice and bodily comportment - “lower my voice, adjust my posture, or laugh less” - to reduce attention. For Carlos, the body becomes an instrument of safety management.

Fatima’s experience shows how embodied legibility is policed within queer spaces through bisexual erasure and stereotype-driven authenticity tests. She recounts being told by queer peers, “no, you’re straight… you look straight, you act straight,” and she responds with a critique of this demand to perform queerness: “What do you mean I look straight?… I have to have a carabiner to prove that… I… want a woman?” Her account highlights that belonging is not only threatened by heteronormativity; it can also be undermined by intra-queer norms that elevate certain “readable” styles as the marker of legitimacy.

Manav also showed that visibility management is not only about avoiding straight scrutiny; it can be shaped by intra-community judgments about how queerness “should” appear:

> Even among the [queer] community… people judge each other based on how expressive you are. And the more you express, people start hating you for no reason… I’ve been told… "Have you met this person?… don’t even… that person looks too gay."

Both Fatima and Manav's accounts reveal that the body is “interpretive terrain”: students are not only navigating heteronormativity, but also respectability hierarchies within queer circles.

For Nora, embodiment is intimately connected to trans liveability. They described experimenting with “pronouns, clothing, and binding in ways that feel affirming but also risky,” and explained how their classroom performance is shaped by embodied hyperawareness: “Presenting… is stressful… because I am hyper-aware of my voice, my chest, and whether my body is aligning with my identity.” Their experience makes clear that trans-belonging is enacted through the body while also being constrained by institutional and social recognition.

Alex adds a further layer to the body being gendered by discussing how it is also sexualised but racialised, and how queerness is interpreted through racialised frames. Theey described themselves as being "very overtly queer" (e.g., "I usually shave my eyebrows and I have a septum piercing… [and] a very fantastical way that I dress"), but also observed that queerness is "more registered from the lens of how white people practice queerness," so they are "less so interpreted as queer sometimes and more so placed in the caricature… of the fantastical black person." Their point indicates that visibility is not fully controllable; even deliberate self-expression can be re-coded by racial stereotypes that displace queerness into racial caricature.

Together, these narratives show that the body is not simply expressive, it is interpretive terrain. Participants' sense of belonging is mediated by how others read them, and those readings are shaped by normative assumptions about gender, sexuality, race, and "what queerness looks like."

4.2.3 Small-city Surveillance and Spatial Risk Assessment: Where Visibility is Safe, and Where it is Costly

A consistent feature of small-city life is heightened recognizability, meaning that people notice newcomers and reputations circulate; spaces are few, and visibility can feel amplified. Participants shared how they responded with spatial risk assessment, mapping where they can be more open and where they should "downshift." Importantly, these calculations are not only about *place* (which streets, which venues, which rooms) but also about *precarity*, the sense that safety and stability can shift quickly, through interpersonal hostility, institutional non-response, or immigration uncertainty. In this way, surveillance is lived as both a geographic condition and an affective one: a "guard up" orientation that organises everyday movement, disclosure, and

mental bandwidth.

Wei linked small-city life to a narrower range of “normal” public presentation, which quietly disciplines how visible queerness can be, even without a single explicit confrontation:

> Even here, I did not express myself as gay much… because I guess here people, almost everybody, act "British," …I heard people [in big cities] are more open… but in here, I feel like if you dress [very differently] and walk across the street, people probably think you’re crazy.

Wei’s comparison frames small-city surveillance not only as “being watched” but as a norm of public affect and style: standing out is read as abnormal. This helps explain why participants’ visibility management can be shaped by anticipated judgment even when overt homophobia is not verbally expressed.

Alex also made explicit connections to public signalling when they indicated that “there are certain parts of town where… I would not bring my pride flag and I would not wear my pride pins.” On campus, Alex extends that logic to social spaces as well: “I feel like any of the clubs on campus, I don’t go in there and be queer.” The rationale is not necessarily in reaction to a single hostile event or encounter but on the uncertainty of safety and a recognition of the presence of “distasteful views.” As Alex put it, “you don’t always know if a space is safe at first glance… being marginalised just means you always have your guard up, no matter where you go.”

Carlos provides a similar account, describing how visibility becomes “a double-edged sword.” He avoids local queer initiatives despite recognizing their value because “being visibly queer can make you feel very watched and very different.” Participation or presentation in public spaces become a site of calculation: “When I’m walking to school or work, I think about

what I'm wearing… In community spaces, I often scan the room to guess whether it's safe to be myself." His strategy is not a withdrawal from queer identity but a selective navigation of where and how identity is enacted.

Carlos' narrative also articulates a double reality. He describes visible pride presence and local queer initiatives as meaningful, yet he adds that he simultaneously experiences harassment ("white guys yell things from cars") and thus feels a constant need to calibrate visibility (lowering his voice, adjusting posture, avoiding attention). The city's smallness intensifies the feeling of being "watched and very different." Canada's protections may exist, but they do not eliminate vulnerability in public spaces. Carlos said:

> I was walking to a grocery store [and] one white guy yelled things from his car… He mocked the way I dressed. It was just tight jeans… Even people around me make jokes in passing that I know are about me even if I pretend not to hear… In community spaces I often scan the room to guess if it's safe to be myself or whether I should lower my voice, adjust my posture, or laugh less to avoid attention.

Rahul's account illustrates a somewhat different spatial relation: he described being "clearly queer presenting" in public and noted that "most people don't mind… [and] even if they would mind, they wouldn't say anything in a public setting." Yet he also described sensing discomfort, people "raised an eyebrow… exchange smiles" Even when violence is absent, then, subtle shifts in public interaction mark where belonging is conditional. Juan offered a parallel example of this "micro-signal" policing, sharing an instance of expressing public couplehood when nothing is said, but the body language of others sent a message about who belongs: "I remember walking with my husband and we were holding hands and one elderly … [man] … raised his eyebrows at us … It was kind of disapproving"

Wei also connects belonging to seasonal isolation, showing how small-city ecology (winter, limited activities, thin networks) shapes well-being and the practical possibility of queer connection:

> In the beginning… the very long winter… was really bad… and you need to take vitamin D… because the deficiency can cause you a lot of depression. And also… as international, it's hard to make friends…, without your friends or family by your side, you usually feel lonely, especially in the winter… And being gay… it's hard to meet people… I ended up taking apps, and I don't really like using the apps.

Wei's account shows how "thin" queer infrastructure is felt not only as a community issue but influences mental health, especially in winter when social life compresses and the routes to intimacy become narrower. It also reinforces that the labour of belonging includes the emotional costs of loneliness in the face of limited avenues for connection.

Across these accounts, small-city living produces distinctive spatial politics. Fewer spaces and greater recognisability narrow the possibility of being anonymous. Spatial politics is also carried affectively across time in continuous calculations that saturates the present, shaping how participants interpret a room, a street, a glance, an intake form, or an interaction with strangers. Safety is provisionally achieved, and feels easily withdrawn in the face of social hostility, or institutional inaction. These conditions help explain why keeping one's guard up becomes not an atypical response, but an ordinary mode of moving through small-city life.

4.2.4 The Transnational Tether: Living Two Lives Across Distance, Family, Diaspora, and Return Imaginaries

Participants' strategies of (in)visibility are shaped not only by local small-city conditions but by ongoing ties to home, particularly in relation to family expectations, cultural

scripts of masculinity/femininity, the risk of being outed through diaspora networks or social media, and the persistent risk of return. Across transcripts, several participants describe a kind of double life, one that is managed through distance, but never fully resolved by it. Importantly, "return" does not appear only as a future event; it operates as a horizon that organises present-day disclosure, digital self-curation, and affective preparedness for re-closeting.

Wei articulated the tether in a materially straightforward way: "freedom" in Canada is inseparable from living independently, whereas return would likely mean co-residence and renewed concealment:

> I'm not out to my family… If I'm back home, I definitely would live with my parents. So… I probably wouldn't be as open… But here… I'm on my own, so I can be whatever I want to do.

Nox highlighted a key mechanism, namely that queer liveability can be enabled not only by national rights discourse, but by the everyday logistics of distance and independent housing. "Return" is thus imagined less as a neutral move and more as a forced re-entry into family governance of visibility. Further, Nox described "return" as something that still happens episodically through visits, where proximity to family reactivates the closet even when everyday life in Canada feels more liveable:

> Every time I went to visit back home… I would go back in the closet just to keep the peace… I'm sacrificing my mental health for two weeks.

Here the tether is framed as recurring labour rather than a single "coming out" event: distance enables exploration, but family contact still demands strategic self-suppression. The costs of this strategy are explicitly affective, experienced as an extraction from well-being rather than a neutral "compromise."

Ravi's account also makes the role of distance explicit. He describes being more confident in Canada partly because he is "ten thousands of kilometers away," which reduces fear that his queerness will "end up reaching my parents." At the same time, he acknowledges that discovery would be "a big disaster," even as he anticipates that inevitability: "if they find out, yes, but ultimately that day is going to come." This tether to family response is also what structures his sense of Canada as a place to which he must try to maintain access. In his return imaginaries, going back is not framed as a neutral relocation but as a threshold event that would reactivate the closet and its consequences: "I would try my best to stay here… The last resort would be to go back." Yet even in that fear, he narrates migration as having produced strengthening. Return, if it happens, is imagined as survivable only because Canada has altered what he believes he can endure.

Juan describes a closely related form of "parallel living" but with a distinct emphasis on cultural scripts of "saving face" and protecting parents from social consequences within extended family networks. In his account, the boundary is explicit: his parents know but his extended family does not. This situation is not framed as simple shame or denial, but as ongoing relational labour he performs for his parents, managing what becomes speakable in family settings and what becomes visible online:

> It's just my parents … [our] relatives don't know. … [I] have to protect the name of our family. … [W]hen I came out to my parents … I just left it with them to decide whether they would talk to my aunts … and even my grandparents … [W]henever my parents [are] in my grandparents' home … they would ask me, "Oh, you're in Canada, now maybe you would be able to find your … [wife] there," … So obviously I don't want to give my parents a "burden," quote unquote. … [I]n social media posts, if I post about

> [my husband] … the relatives would talk about me surely. So I don't want my parents to … have that kind of experience.

Juan's description shows how the "transnational tether" is not only emotional; it is infrastructural and routine: video calls, family gatherings, and the imagined audience of a social media post. Even after migration, the "closet" can be reconstituted through the everyday requirement to protect parents from gossip, blame, or reputational harm. In this sense, concealment is not merely personal risk management; it is also intergenerational care-work conducted under constraint.

Nora also connects transnational pressure to cultural expectations of being a "good child" and not bringing shame, which shapes their reluctance to correct misgendering even in Canada: "the internalised idea that 'good children' do not cause trouble or bring shame like makes it hard to assert myself when misgendered or, you know, discriminated against." Their narrative shows how migration does not erase cultural scripts; instead, they travel and are reactivated in new contexts through institutional interactions and interpersonal risk. In this sense, "return" need not be explicitly planned to function as a constraint: the ongoing presence of home scripts can discipline what becomes correctable, sayable, or worth contesting in Canada.

Preet added a slightly different account, noting how online space functions not only as recognition or community, but as a visibility-management tool that allows her to maintain (partial) coherence across audiences. Rather than framing social media simply as connection, she narrates it as a platform that requires constant boundary work, curating who is allowed to see what, and when:

> The privacy of being queer, there's always times when my social life is mostly just if

> people have to see it, it's going to be through Instagram… so even if I have to post stories or something, I sometimes take my dad off the story… or like I'll take my cousins… off the story… or post on my "close friends" stories… [Life would be so much simpler if I have not had to do that part in the back of my head.

What matters here for Preet is that "distance" does not eliminate the labour of being tethered to family and diaspora; rather, it reorganises that labour into ongoing platform management and split-audience selfhood.

Nox's account extends this careful curation into temporary withdrawal, showing how transnational audiences can make visibility feel risky even at a distance:

> I deleted my Instagram… for a year… because I felt… suddenly so exposed… I closed up… for about a year because I felt very watched.

Analytically, Nox highlighted that strategic (in)visibility is not only about managing who sees content, but sometimes about stepping out of visibility infrastructures altogether when exposure feels unmanageable.

Shanice similarly describes social media as a site of transnational risk management, where queer relational life has to be actively partitioned across audiences:

> I have a girlfriend right now… but I don't really post anything about this on my Instagram because I'm, like, I don't know which one of you people is an 'op' [someone who might report back]. If I post anything, it's on my "close friends," and I remove people from that too… because some of you are suspicious.

Her language of "close friends" lists and constant audience-pruning shows how the closet can reappear digitally, even when physical distance from family reduces day-to-day surveillance.

Shanice extends this logic into her explicit return imaginaries. For her, return is not

imagined as desirable, but as something she might be compelled to survive, an affective future that is both threatening and framed through endurance:

> Going back, I would have to be a lot more careful. My mom is somewhat of a public figure… I feel like she knows the entire island sometimes. So I would definitely have to be on my toes a lot more… And then I would have to leave my friends, my girlfriend behind.

What stands out here is that "return" is narrated as both renewed constraint on queer visibility and the potential collapse of the relational infrastructure she has built in Canada with friends and a partner, making immigration uncertainty feel like a threat not only to her educational plans but to queer futurity.

Fatima articulates this return horizon through a more direct language of strategic concealment. If conditions worsen, she states: "I would… go back into the closet. I would identify as straight." Her comment underscores how future insecurity can reshape identity practice: not necessarily changing identity per se, but changing what becomes sayable and liveable in public. In other words, the closet is not only a past condition left behind through migration; it remains a policy- and context-responsive strategy that can be reactivated if the conditions of liveability collapse.

Manav's discussion of return is less about "choice" than about the consequences of being forced back. He narrated return as a contraction of liveable selfhood. His framing makes explicit that immigration futures are simultaneously queer futures, because the capacity to be "myself" is unevenly distributed across national contexts:

> I feel like, at least in Canada, queer people are a bit more valued than they would be back home… [where] people… kill their own family members because they are [queer].

> So, like, I feel like I would be, if I were to be sent… to go back, I feel like I wouldn't be able to be myself as much as I am now.

Manav's account clarifies that the transnational tether is not only relational; it is also structured by the state. "Return" is not merely a family event, but a political and administrative force that can mandate re-closeting by relocating someone back into a context where queer life is not equally liveable.

Across participants, the transnational tether is not simply a background context; it is an active structuring condition for strategic (in)visibility. Participants manage what can be known "here" without triggering consequences "there," while simultaneously living with the possibility that "there" may become the place they are returned to, voluntarily or by force. In this way, "return," "re-closeting," and "parallel lives" are not separate analytic issues. They are the future-facing dimension of the same everyday labour: sustaining liveability across borders, across audiences, and across unequal national conditions of queer possibility.

4.3 Theme 3: Whiteness as the Default, Racialised Queer Life and the Limits of "Inclusive" Spaces

While Theme 2 traces how participants manage belonging through strategic (in)visibility, Theme 3 explains why such strategies are often necessary in the first place. Across the transcripts, participants describe how whiteness structures everyday social life, institutional routines, and even queer-designated spaces in ways that shape who feels safe, seen, and socially legitimate. For many, racism and xenophobia are not peripheral to queer experience in small Ontario cities; they are foundational conditions that organise access to community, credibility, and care.

Participants do not describe racism only as overt harassment, although some do recount

explicit incidents. More commonly, they narrate a continuum ranging from everyday microaggressions and institutional "neutrality," to forms of racialised exclusion that are harder to prove but easy to feel: being treated as suspicious, belittled, tokenised, or "out of place." Importantly, these dynamics also show up inside queer communities, through white-dominant norms of "what queerness looks like," race-blind talk that becomes harmful in practice, and social cultures where racialised queer students feel tolerated rather than included. In this theme, participants' accounts complicate any assumption that queer spaces are automatically safer than mainstream spaces, and highlight how "inclusion" can remain rhetorical when it is not paired with accountability. Participants' accounts can be read as critiques of neoliberal inclusion: diversity is narrated as a rhetorical or reputational commitment, while the ongoing labour of making spaces liveable, and responding to harm, is privatised onto racialised queer students.

4.3.1 Racism as the More Frequent (and Sometimes More Immediate) Threat than Overt Homophobia

A striking cross-participant pattern is the relative frequency with which racism is experienced, sometimes explicitly described as more prevalent than direct homophobia. Shanice made the hierarchy of everyday threat explicit, arguing that institutional enthusiasm around queerness can coexist with near-silence about racism:

> All of the energy of being an accepting person goes into queer identities… But then when you're like, "These are the things I'm experiencing as a person of colour on campus," it's crickets… I've honestly experienced more uncomfortable situations as a person of colour than I have as a queer person.

Her account sharpens the claim that "inclusion" is not just about general campus climate but an uneven allocation of recognition, where queer affirmation may be performatively available

while racial harm remains normalised or unaddressed.

Ravi also made this distinction clear: “Skin colour definitely, but not because I’m gay that I experienced a bad experience here.” Rahul echoed that racial hostility was more noticeable:

> I've primarily had that experience [of racism] at work… [where] most of the employees, say 50% are Indian or South Asian. And then even among the other 50%, there's like 30% would be other immigrants… If [customers], they're not able to find the help that they need in the store or they don't get proper service, they get mad at employees, particularly immigrants: "You guys can’t manage the store properly… things are not the same as they were." Like, it's probably something, they are always mad.

Nora summarized the same perception succinctly: “More than transphobia, I see racism here.” Carlos similarly concludes, “not so much homophobia but I feel racism is so much prevalent in my city.”

Participants’ examples span everyday settings, workplaces, buses, public streets, and campus environments. Ravi’s account includes both subtle and explicit racism, from being “belittle[d]… because I’m Asian” to direct verbal abuse: “they’re like, "You fucking Indian…” and “You guys are here from another country.” His examples locate racism in ordinary city life, particularly interactions with strangers, showing how racialisation can interrupt mundane routines like commuting, working retail, and moving through the street.

Fatima, too, described racism as something that “kept on happening,” mostly from white residents and particularly from older white people. Her first-month Walmart story highlights how even prosocial acts such as trying to help an elderly couple can be rejected through racialised disgust:

> There was this old couple right in front of me. Their basket fell, and I picked it up for the uncle… Like, I got you… I got them everything safe… they didn't wanna hold the bags anymore. They didn't want that stuff anymore. They were like, "Get away."

She also recounted being told on the street to "go back to your own country" and later described a subtler but pointed incident in a campus wellness setting where a white woman grabbed her hand and said, "I hope they let you stay here." The line is framed as concern, but its effect is to position her as conditionally permitted–an outsider whose presence is subject to gatekeeping.

For Shanice, racialisation is established immediately through routine institutional contact, before any "community belonging" can even begin. She recounts,

> The very first day I came here, I went to the front desk to get my keys… and the guy at the desk was like, "Oh, you speak really good English." … And then he was like, "Where are you from?" And I said [a country in the Caribbean], and he goes, "Oh, is that somewhere in Africa?" … It was really confusing.

The exchange operates as a microaggressive positioning of her as foreign and linguistically "unexpected," undercutting multicultural university narratives by showing how ignorance can be embedded in everyday institutional gatekeeping.

Mario's account also indicates that vulnerability can appear in everyday infrastructures. He described seeing homophobic graffiti on campus that paired anti-Black language with a homophobic slur. Analytically, such incidents matter, not because they are statistically representative but because they puncture the assumption that safety is secured once and for all by national reputation. These incidents register hate as something that can inhabit the built environment, existing in the background of ordinary student life. I am quoting him verbatim with hesitation given the terms he used, but they speak to the hateful discourse present in public

spaces:

> In the library at our university, I see some people have written some homophobic slurs like "Some [racist n-word] are [homophobic f-word], but how are you six feet and like dicks?" … there's no reason to be so mean. Like how does it bother you that another person likes what they like?

Tenno's account complements these narratives by describing racism as unevenly distributed across racialised groups, experienced not only as direct encounters, but also as a recognizable social pattern of who becomes the primary target of public resentment. He frames this as something he observes even when he does not describe being the direct object of racism himself:

> I haven't [experienced] any racism… I feel like the main racism in Canada seems to be mainly against [folks from India]… And what I've seen so far is that Indians in Canada are the same as Latinos in the U.S.… Latinos in Canada, there are so few that… people don't see us as a threat per se… so they treat us [as] normal.

Analytically, Tenno's "distribution" framing adds a key dimension to the theme, namely that whiteness operates not only through a simple white/nonwhite binary, but also through racial hierarchies that render some groups more surveilled, more resented, and more readily positioned as "the problem" of immigration. This pattern matters for queer life because it shapes the baseline conditions under which queer international students move through public space: who is likely to be stopped, stared at, insulted, assumed foreign, or read as an unwanted presence.

Nox makes explicit how racialisation in small-city life is mediated by perceived "fit" with local whiteness, where white-passing can reduce exposure to overt hostility but without

eliminating everyday othering:

> I do have the privilege of being white-passing… I've heard stories of my friends… being told, "Go back to where you came from"… and I've never had that. But I've had many people tell me, "Oh, but you don't look [like an immigrant/international student]."

Nox's experience shows a dual process: passing can function as a protective buffer in public space, while stereotypes still mark them as foreign through "you don't look" talk that polices national identity and belonging. Here, whiteness operates as an everyday default, shaping who is targeted and how.

Across these accounts, racism is not narrated as a single event but as an ambient condition that shapes safety calculations, self-presentation, and participation. It becomes one of the central reasons belonging remains fragile, contingent, and often transactional.

4.3.2 "Queer Space" as White Space, Microaggressions, Exclusion, and the Racial Politics of Safety

Participants repeatedly described queer-designated spaces, especially campus pride and gender/sexuality centres, as both necessary and uneven: they function as key sites of refuge, resource access, and community formation, yet they are also narrated as white-dominant social worlds governed by white norms of interaction, humour, and "appropriate" vulnerability. When these spaces are additionally constrained by limited hours, low visibility, and inconsistent institutional accountability, "inclusion" becomes less a stable condition than a contingent experience; in principle, students can access queer infrastructure but the ease, safety, and cultural usability of that access is unevenly distributed. Across accounts, whiteness operates in queer spaces through two linked mechanisms: (1) numerical dominance (i.e., who is in the room); and (2) normative dominance (i.e., whose cultural references, humour, pace of speech,

and vulnerability are treated as standard). Together, these mechanisms shape who feels like an "insider," whose discomfort is recognised as legitimate, and whose needs are treated as "too much" for spaces that are institutionally branded as supportive. The gap between "supportive" branding and uneven lived usability reflects neoliberal diversity management, where inclusion becomes a low-cost institutional claim rather than a redistributive practice backed by staffing, training, and enforceable accountability.

Fatima names this contradiction directly by critiquing her campus queer space dynamics as "whitewashed" and by refusing the idea that queer-rights alignment automatically produces racial safety. In her account, racism is not an external threat that queer spaces protect against but is something that can be normalised inside queer spaces through humour and "jokes." She stated,

> There are a bunch of people who make… slavery jokes… [J]ust because we are starting for queer rights doesn't mean we're gonna just… be okay on slavery jokes.

For her, it is not that queer spaces are uniformly hostile; rather, it is that "safe space" branding can mask racialised harm when boundaries are not enforced and when "inclusion" is treated as assumed rather than practiced.

Alex's narrative develops a structural account of how whiteness is reproduced within queer spaces and how it shapes participation and wellbeing. Referring to group conversations at a pride space on campus, theey observe that:

> [E]very single time, my friends of colour… want to talk to me afterwards because of how uncomfortable they felt… [I]t is not because of the stuff directed towards them, it's [that] …they are the only person of colour in the room besides me…[T]he white people in that space… talk about their struggles and like it is very valid for them, but compared

> to that international student of colour, it feels like they're complaining about privilege… [and] micro aggressions are a big thing in that space to me and the other person of colour attending… Somebody kept trying to point out that I'm Black and they would randomly say stuff to me about, you know, it's okay to say that people are… because we obviously look different. And they'll be, like, "Yeah, like not everybody wants to reclaim slurs"… [and] they'll gesture to me, like in the Black community, the N-word. And I'm like, that's not relevant right now.

Discomfort is felt not only because of direct targeting but also to the experience of being the only racialised person in the room such as Alex's experience of having to witness white people's race talk as if racialised participants are present to serve as reference points. Theey describe the experience as both jarring and inappropriate in the moment.

Alex also captured how white queer spaces can feel socially coherent for white participants while exhausting for racialised participants because whiteness is treated as normative queer culture rather than one positionality among others. Alex describes how whiteness becomes coded as the default texture of queerness itself, saying, "whiteness feels inherently queer" because "all of the movies that are popular are white queer movies." In this framing, racialised queer people are positioned as "add-ons" to an already-formed queer public organised around white cultural reference points and expectations.

Several participants also describe the "white default" as not only being about who is present but as a kind of cultural and interactional closeness that produces exclusion without explicit hostility. Rahul's account frames the pride space on campus as "safe" but culturally misaligned. He described entering the space and finding that "they were having conversations on a very different level… about very random things," leaving him feeling that "we're not at the

same wavelength." Importantly, he said that "No one was… trying to not include me." However, he also did not feel meaningfully included. This distinction matters analytically: exclusion can occur through a presumed sameness and shared idioms, shared background knowledge, and shared tempo of talk, rather than overt gatekeeping. In this sense, "safe space" can still reproduce stratified belonging, where some students enter a room and immediately recognise the social code, while others must translate and perform, or remain peripheral.

Juan described the outsidering process with particular clarity through the mundane social mechanics of attending a pride-related event. Even when he is physically present, he narrated the difficulty of entering a world where relationships and belonging appear already organised, and where whiteness is not incidental but structuring, shaping who feels like an "insider" before any words are exchanged:

> We attended … [a pride] event … and … to be honest, I still … felt like an outsider, even though … my husband and I were there … [O]bviously we didn't know anyone … [but other] people knew each other already … so it was kind of hard to introduce ourselves … because most of them were white [Canadians] … We were just a bit too shy, I guess … These spaces are mostly Canadianised [is] exactly what I … felt.

He named these spaces as "mostly Canadianised." The point here is not that his shyness is personal failure; rather, it becomes a diagnostic of how belonging is already organised before a newcomer arrives. "Inclusion" may exist in principle, but entry requires social traction that is unevenly available when you are new, racialised, and outside the local relational web.

Echoing other participants' descriptions of pride spaces as "Canadianised," Shanice and Nox both emphasised that whiteness shapes both the staffing and the everyday social makeup of campus queer infrastructure. Shanice stated:

> All the people who kind of run the space are white individuals, and yeah, they're queer, but they are also white and they're from Canada. So, there are things that we experience that they would never really fully understand … And a lot of the people that visit the centre are also white, … there aren't that many people of colour or international students that go there.

Her point is not that queer spaces are unusable but that "safety" and "belonging" are culturally uneven: formal inclusion exists, yet the interpretive resources and lived understandings needed by queer international students of colour are not assumed as central to the space. This helps explain why some students avoid the centre or access it only selectively, despite valuing its existence.

Referring to the pride space on their campus, Nox said,

> I think… [it] is very much just that one room… and… we haven't really integrated much of culture… [The coordinator]… is white… and… all of [the staff] are white… [so] there's definitely… a lack of something specifically for international people.

Nox's point matters because it shows how "safe space" can still be culturally partial: inclusion may be available in principle, but the space can remain oriented around white Canadian norms of language, programming, and reference points. It also clarifies why some queer international students may value the space's existence while still feeling it is not fully "for them."

Tenno's account deepens this analysis by naming the normative structure of "safety" itself as culturally specific. He distinguished between his pride centre as an institution and what he calls "the crowd" and "the culture" of interaction inside it. In his narrative, the problem is not only the numerical dominance of white people in these queer spaces but the way "safe space" norms can operate as affective gatekeeping, policing what kinds of stories and feelings

are allowed to be present, especially stories marked by migration, violence, stigma, and what he called "heavy" trauma:

> This is not a criticism of [the centre]. This is more of a criticism of the crowd [in the centre]… [M]any times [if] you're a queer person of colour or a queer person… of immigrant descent… you have to talk about heavy topics… [because] we come from countries where it's not as accepting… so we have stories, we have trauma… But whenever you want to maybe discuss [this], … I feel like many times they just… beat the topic out. Like, "Oh, we don't want to talk about that"… [I] go into a group session, [I] listen, … [I] empathize… and then it's [my] turn and [I am] thinking finally somebody will listen to me… and then… they interrupt [me] and they say, "Oh, this is a bit too much for me. I think we should just… talk about something else." … So that feels very dismissive of your experiences.

Tenno's narrative makes an analytic claim about Canadianisation and whiteness without reducing it to a stereotype alone. He framed a Western/Canadian communicative norm of an accepted right to refuse difficult conversation and contrasted it with the needs of queer migrants who have few spaces where their experiences can be spoken at all. The effect is not merely discomfort; it is a denial of legibility, a sense that one's pain is "too much" for the very space advertised as supportive.

Tenno then reframed "inclusion" as a question of what kinds of conversations queer spaces are willing to hold space for and proposed expanded ideas and forms of safety through differentiated programming:

> I understand safe spaces are important. But I feel like… they could make maybe… once a month… a session with no holds barred,… heavy topics are gonna be talked [about] in

> this one. If you don't want… stuff that might be triggering, don't… come, but let people talk…

This is an important pivot: it frames cultural safety not as the elimination of boundaries, but as the design of boundaries that do not systematically silence immigrant and racialised queer experience.

Tenno also brings into view how whiteness reorganises not only queer support spaces but queer sociality and desire, particularly the racial politics of dating and hooking up. Where Fatima and Alex foreground microaggressions and cultural reference points, Tenno foregrounds a blunt sexual economy of desirability and exclusion:

> There is racism in the gay community in Canada. There is a lot of racism… [B]eing Latino, it's not like we get negative racism… I literally been told… "Oh, you're Latino, I want to hook up with you"… I do know that there's a lot of racism against Indian men… in… the gay community in Canada… and… with Chinese specifically… And I… don't even want to think about what they say to the Indian[s]…

His claims show that "whiteness as default" is not only about who is present in a pride space. It is also about who is imagined as desirable, whose bodies are fetishised as "exotic" and whose bodies are rendered unwanted or ridiculed, and racial hierarchies that can persist even within spaces that reject heteronormativity.

Wei offered a brief but pointed example of how racial hierarchy is enacted through app culture, where rejection is communicated through rapid exclusion rather than explicit slurs, saying that, 'On Tinder or Grindr… a few times… they don't like Asian… and they just blocked [me]." Even without explicit name-calling, the "block" functions as a racialised gatekeeping practice that communicates who is desirable and who is disposable in queer

society. This supports the claim that whiteness and racial hierarchy persist inside queer spaces, not only outside them.

Ravi's relationship to pride space is defined by uncertainty and hesitation. Despite knowing about the space, he "never… went," explaining that he wanted friends but did not know if the space would help him "in finding a gay friend" and also feared being "seen by someone else who I did not want to know [that I am gay]." His account shows how queer spaces are evaluated not only as sites of support but also as sites of exposure, particularly for students managing closeting in relation to family or co-national networks.

Mario's story illustrates how even when a queer space is available, it may be hard to inhabit as a social world for newcomers arriving with fear, internalised stigma, and trauma. His experience of pride space demonstrates how an institution can exist "on paper" and still be narratively experienced as "too much" too soon:

> There was an event by [the] pride centre and a friend invited me there, but I did not feel comfortable. It's because from all of my trauma, I kind of have internalised homophobia. So it's not easy. One, I have social anxiety. So it was a social event and my friend kind of like dumped me and was talking to other people, so I felt alone and seen [by] a lot of queer people that are comfortable with themselves. And I'm not quite there yet.

His account shows how "access" is not only logistical, it is also temporal and affective. Students may arrive into environments where queer life is possible, but their capacity to access that possibility is shaped by what they carry from home contexts and by whether the social design of the space anticipates newcomers who are not yet "comfortable with themselves."

Preet spoke not only as a user of queer space but as someone embedded in its

maintenance. She explicitly framed campus queer infrastructure as both a refuge and a place that requires active cultivation to become usable for more than a narrow “default” constituency. At the same time, she did not romanticize queer campus spaces as inherently inclusive. She recognised the limits of the “safe space” narrative when whiteness, conservatism, and uneven empathy remain present inside the very infrastructures meant to provide care:

> Since me being there and my other co-worker, who’s also a person of colour, being there, [recently] I feel like I have seen a shift in what the other white queer kids talk about… I feel like more recently we’ve had other students of colour join in… but also these spaces are extremely whitewashed. And it’s not just whitewashed queer spaces, but we also have queer students who are conservative. Queer students who might not necessarily empathise with immigrants.

Preet’s positioning matters here because it makes visible the labour of “making inclusion real” from inside the space: inclusion is not achieved by simply declaring a space welcoming; it requires ongoing practice, interruption, and governance of the social climate.

On another institutional matter, Alex described the burdens of misrecognition and the emotional labour of correcting others. As theey noted in an earlier section above, they experience being “misgendered all the time,” and theey critiqued how apologies can become performative monologues that re-centre faculty and staff members' feelings. For example, instead of simply correcting themselves (e.g., “Sorry… and moving on”), professors “do a monologue,” which makes Alex feel guilty and responsible for the interaction. Alex also called attention to staff practices that intensify harm: when staff use the name on an ID automatically, or rely on “Sir/Ma’am/Miss,” they reproduce gendered assumptions that could be avoided with basic procedural shifts. As Alex reports,

> People are always assuming my pronouns and it makes me really anxious… I think [there should be] some form of staff training… [so if a] student gives you their ID for you to sign them in, don't immediately address them by the name that's on that ID or address them by Sir/Ma'am/Miss… there are ways to politely address people without it being gendered… [when] everybody gets nicknames, like when you go from Abigail to Abby, nobody bats an eye. Everyone gets that. But when it comes to people who have a dead name,… people have reasons why they don't want to be called the things that are on their ID. And I think that we should just start addressing [that].

Other ideas that surfaced in the interviews included Rahul's argument that universities should "make sure that the students coming in from other countries don't end up being homophobic," while also recognizing that a single presentation on this topic may only be "performative." Fatima described reporting racism connected to a campus therapy-dog setting and notes in trying to move her complaint forward, she wondered whether reporting pathways reliably lead to action. Alex also explicitly questioned the efficacy of reporting when power is entrenched (e.g., "old white man who has tenure") and when faculty can "straight [drop] slurs," suggesting a climate where institutional consequences feel unlikely.

Across these accounts, the idea of institutional inclusion is not rejected outright as participants frequently note moments of affirmation. However, the dominant pattern is inconsistency: inclusive practices depend on individual staff members, individual professors, and specific micro-contexts. This unevenness pushes racialised queer students into additional labour: constant scanning, constant weighing of whether to correct, and constant calculations of whether the institution will respond meaningfully when harm does occur.

4.3.3 The "Double Bind" of Intersectional Community, Choosing between Racism and Queerphobia

The findings in Theme 3 are also characterised by a recurring double bind: participants describe being pushed to choose between spaces that offer racial comfort but queer hostility and spaces that offer queer acceptance but racial exclusion or tokenisation. Alex articulated the bind most explicitly, saying that, "it's very annoying to… either go to the white queers and be racialised or be around Black people and have homophobia and transphobia." This is not simply social inconvenience; it is a structural predicament produced by how communities are organised and how marginalisations cluster unevenly across spaces.

Ravi's and Rahul's narratives show how queerphobia can travel through diaspora networks and co-national circles in Canada. Ravi described a classmate who "makes fun of gay people" leading Ravi to avoid disclosure and avoid confrontation: "I did not have the interest to fight against him." Rahul recounted discovering that a former roommate "talked a lot of shit about me behind my back," describing it as "pretty homophobic" and noted how such dynamics persist in a small city where "you keep running into them." These accounts illustrate that migration does not automatically sever participants from the homophobic norms they were attempting to escape; rather, those norms can be re-encountered through co-national proximity, shared housing markets, and clustered student networks.

Tenno's account adds an important mechanism to this picture: not only does queerphobia travel through co-national circles, but co-national "insulation" can make queer participation itself risky because queer space attendance becomes socially legible evidence. In his description, some international queer students do not avoid the pride centre because it is white or hostile but because they are not out within their own clustered friendship groups, and

therefore they cannot risk being seen:

> A lot of immigrants… [are] insulating [in] their little groups… [and] that is precisely what limits them coming to… pride centre… because they're under a little group of… friends… and they might not necessarily be out of the closet with that group… [T]hey mainly have a bunch of friends from their same countries and they do not come out. They're still in the closet and… they do not go to pride events because going to an event like that is basically an admission of them being gay… I personally know around five people… [in] the same situation.

Thus, "the double bind" is not only between *two* external communities ("white queer spaces" versus "diaspora spaces") but also within the structure of immigrant sociality itself. When international students' social worlds are built through co-national clustering (shared language, shared housing, shared coursework), queerness can become socially expensive precisely because those networks are also the primary source of everyday support.

Tenno narrated a further complication: whiteness and racial hierarchy can circulate *within* immigrant communities through internalised preferences and racial myths. He recounted Latino peers questioning his relationship with an Indian man, and he named an explicitly racial project of "bettering" one's lineage through proximity to whiteness:

> Friends of mine… Latino friends… would say, "Why are you dating an Indian dude?"… [T]here's this phrase called… "Mejorando la raza" [meaning]… when you're dating someone white or lighter skin… because… their babies are gonna come out whiter.

"Whiteness as default" is not only imposed from outside; it can also be reproduced through intra-community logics of desirability, respectability, and racial aspiration. These dynamics intensify the sense that there is no uncomplicated space: queer belonging can be undermined by

racism inside queer spaces, while racial belonging can be undermined by queerphobia inside diaspora spaces, and both can be complicated by racial hierarchies that are reproduced within immigrant communities themselves.

Fatima described a different version of the bind: she experiences Canada as a place where she can be "more open," but she also manages risk within the [home country] community because she needs community support and does not want homophobia "on top of" other social judgments: "I just don't want the homophobia… so I just hide it sort of." Her account shows how diaspora belonging can be materially and emotionally necessary, even when it carries queer risk.

Theme 3 shows that "inclusive Canada" is not a uniform lived reality in small Ontario cities. Whiteness operates as a structuring norm across public life, campus life, and queer spaces, producing a racialised distribution of safety, credibility, and community access. Participants' accounts reveal that racism is often more frequent than overt homophobia, and that queer spaces themselves can reproduce exclusion through white dominance, race-blind talk, and weak boundary enforcement. As a result, many participants are forced into intersectional trade-offs: seeking protection from racism can mean exposure to queerphobia, and seeking queer acceptance can mean absorbing racial harm.

4.4 Conclusion

Taken together, the three themes in this chapter show that being queer shapes participants' educational experiences and daily lives in small Ontario cities through a continuous negotiation of safety, visibility, and recognition across campus and community contexts. Participants arrive with imaginaries of Canada as a comparatively safer and more liveable queer "refuge," but these imaginaries are reworked through small-city realities, thin

queer infrastructures, heightened recognizability, and the gap between rights “on paper” and vulnerability in everyday interactions. Within this landscape, students’ accounts reveal how belonging is often conditional and actively managed through strategic (in)visibility, embodied self-presentation, and careful decisions about disclosure that remain tethered to family, diasporic networks, and immigration futurities. At the same time, participants’ narratives underscore that institutional and community supports are unevenly accessible: whiteness structures public life, campus routines, and queer-designated spaces in ways that can reproduce racialised exclusion, producing intersectional trade-offs that directly affect well-being.

In the next chapter, I draw these findings together in relation to the study’s research questions by examining how queer identity inflects educational and everyday life, how supports and barriers are produced across institutional and community infrastructures, and how these conditions shape participants’ sense of belonging and well-being. I also consider the broader theoretical and practical implications of these findings for small-city campuses, local services, and future research.

Chapter 5: The Paradox of Inclusion: Reading the Findings Through Intersectionality, Identity Management, and Neoliberalism

In this chapter, I interpret the findings presented in Chapter 4 by placing them in conversation with the conceptual and empirical scholarship reviewed in Chapter 2 and the literature review and by drawing out what my participants' narratives *mean* for understanding queer international students' lives in small Ontario cities. The purpose of this discussion is not to re-report the findings but to make an interpretive move: to identify the study's contribution to knowledge and explain how the findings extend, complicate, or refine existing literature and theory. Here, I clarify what the themes *mean* as patterned social processes, and to situate participants' meaning-making within broader relations of power, institutional arrangements, and place-based conditions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

The empirical focus of this dissertation, queer international students living and studying in small Ontario cities, responds to a key gap identified in the literature: scholarship on queer students and scholarship on international students often proceed separately, and research that centres their intersection remains limited, particularly outside major urban centres. In Chapter 4, I presented a thematic narrative analysis of 14 interviews, attending to how participants structured their stories over time (pre-migration imaginaries, arrival, adjustment, and ongoing life-making) and how "place" entered those stories as an active shaping condition rather than a neutral backdrop. This chapter builds from that analytic foundation to answer the study's research questions: (RQ1) how queerness shapes participants' educational experiences and everyday life in small Ontario cities; (RQ2) what supports and barriers they encounter across campus and community contexts; and (RQ3) how these conditions shape belonging and wellbeing.

The interpretive strategy for this chapter is explicitly theoretical. I read the findings through a combined framework of intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism because participants' accounts consistently show that queer life is not navigated around sexuality or gender alone and that the conditions of liveability are shaped by political-economic and institutional arrangements as much as by interpersonal encounters. Intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1997; 2013) provides the analytic language to understand how sexuality and/or gender identity are lived simultaneously with racialisation, nationality, language and accent, religion, class resources, and immigration status, producing forms of vulnerability and belonging that are not additive but structurally entangled. Identity management theory (Cupach & Imahori, 1993) complements intersectionality by foregrounding the everyday communicative work through which participants negotiate identity across audiences and contexts: disclosure, selective silence, embodied presentation, and the continuous calibration of what can be visible to whom, and when. Finally, neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005) offers a structural account of why inclusion may be highly visible in institutional messaging while the material supports that make inclusion *usable* remain uneven, thin, or individualised, particularly in small-city contexts where community service ecologies are limited and institutions become primary access points.

Across this discussion chapter, I develop one overarching argument that threads through the themes: participants live a paradox in which rights and inclusion can be visible "on paper" and in institutional discourse, while daily life is shaped by intensified exposure in small-city contexts, racialised dynamics within and beyond queer communities, uneven institutional responsiveness, and migration-related uncertainty. This paradox does not imply that participants' experiences were uniformly negative; rather, it clarifies the central empirical insight of the

dissertation: “queer safety” is not a stable national attribute accessed through migration but a place-specific, relational, and infrastructural condition that must be repeatedly assembled. In participants’ narratives, this assembly work often takes the form of strategic (in)visibility, careful audience management (including transnational audiences), and ongoing risk assessment, practices that are intensified by small-city recognizability and shaped by the racialised organisation of both mainstream and queer-designated spaces.

In the remainder of this chapter, I interpret the three themes from Chapter 4 through the combined theoretical framework. Theme 1 examines how “Canada” is narrated as an imagined refuge and then recalibrated through small-city realities; Theme 2 traces how conditional safety is lived as strategic identity work and visibility management; and Theme 3 explains how whiteness structures institutions and queer spaces, producing racialised distributions of belonging and a recurring double bind in which spaces rarely hold all aspects of the self. Then, I synthesize all of these themes to articulate the central contribution of my research more explicitly and to map the findings cleanly onto the research questions. Further, I translate the synthesis into implications across three sites that participants’ narratives identified as consequential: (1) universities/colleges in small Ontario cities; (2) the broader small-city service ecology; and (3) immigration policy contexts that shape status precarity and future horizons. I then turn to methodological reflections and a discussion of limitations, clarifying what this thematic narrative approach makes visible and what its scope conditions are before outlining future research directions, including a focused agenda on neoliberal international education and queer liveability. Finally, I conclude the chapter by restating the core argument and addressing the research questions directly, bridging into my dissertation’s concluding chapter.

5.1 Themes 1–3 in Conversation with Intersectionality, Identity Management Theory, and Neoliberalism

The intersectionality lens (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1997) I bring to my study's findings foregrounds how sexuality and gender are lived in tandem with racialisation, nationality, class, religion, language, and immigration status; identity management theory (Imahori & Cupach, 2005) directs attention to the communicative and relational work of negotiating identity across audiences and settings; and neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005) provides a way to analyse how international education markets, institutional branding, and responsibilising policy environments shape what becomes possible, and what becomes precarious, for students who are simultaneously learners, migrants, and targets of institutional revenue strategies.

Reading Theme 1 through intersectionality and neoliberalism shows how "Canada" is narrated as a comparative refuge while the realities of small-city settlement expose how rights and reputations are filtered through local infrastructures, racialised encounters, and the political economy of international education. Participants' accounts position "Canada" first as an idea, a destination assembled through legal narratives of equality, media images of urban pride, and what becomes taken-for-granted comparative knowledge that Canada is "safer than" other places. Yet that imagined refuge is not simply an individualised hope or a generic "Canada dream." It is a situated imagination formed at the intersection of sexuality and/or gender identity with race, class, nationality, and immigration status. For some participants, Canada was imagined as a place where queer life could be publicly survivable (e.g., the possibility of marriage, gender-affirming care, or simply fewer immediate social consequences for being known as queer). For others, Canada emerged through constrained choice, scholarship availability, affordability, program access, and perceived immigration pathways, where queer

safety operated as one criterion among many rather than the sole reason for mobility. In intersectional terms, then, the “refuge” story does not function as a universal narrative of liberation. It is produced within uneven social locations: the risks and constraints participants sought to escape (e.g., family surveillance, taboo, criminalisation, cultural shame, or overt violence) were not separable from their positionalities as racialised students, gender nonconforming students, students with varying economic resources, and migrants whose futures remained tethered to administrative regimes and familial/diasporic publics.

Interpreting the “Canada as refuge” narrative through neoliberalism clarifies why it is simultaneously compelling and unstable. Participants’ imaginaries do not emerge in a vacuum; they are shaped by neoliberal circuits that tie migration to education markets, treat mobility as self-improvement, and position “inclusive Canada” as a valuable reputational commodity. In the literature, the internationalisation of higher education is increasingly understood as entangled with neoliberal principles: marketisation, corporatisation, and revenue dependence on international tuition (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Marginson, 2016). At the policy-strategy level, international education is framed primarily as an economic project and “international student” as an economic asset and labour pipeline (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2023; Global Affairs Canada, 2019). The Government's 2019–2024 strategy foregrounds quantified economic contribution: “international students contributed over $21.6 billion to Canada’s GDP” and “supported 170,000 jobs,” (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2023, p. 2), with international education positioned as a major export services sector (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). Most recently, as reported by MacDonald (2026), Ontario’s 2026 funding announcement explicitly framed current sector strain as partly resulting from federal immigration policy changes that reduced revenue generated from international

student tuition fees. This acknowledgement is significant because it positions international enrolment not merely as demographic diversity, but as a core operating revenue stream within a marketised funding model (MacDonald, 2026).

Within such a neoliberal framework, political economy, inclusion and diversity can function as institutional and national branding assets, highly visible in messaging and recruitment materials, while the material infrastructures that make inclusion *usable* may remain thin, uneven, or individualised (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Participants' accounts map onto this dynamic in concrete ways. "Canada" is narrated not only as queer-friendly but also as financially and administratively strategic: the comparative affordability of Canada relative to other destinations, the perceived manageability of study-to-immigration pathways, and the belief that Canada offers "active actions" rather than merely tolerance are woven into decisions and justifications for coming, and staying. In other words, the refuge story is also a mobility story shaped by neoliberal logics: education becomes the route through which a safer life is imagined as achievable, while the risks and costs of that route, precarious status, labour market constraints, housing pressures, and uneven institutional support are largely downloaded onto students as individual burdens to manage. In addition, international students are valued as bearers of culture and then, when they arrive, are marginalized by it. Theme 1, therefore, suggests that "queer safety" operates, in part, as a promise circulating within international education markets: an affective and reputational value that helps make Canada legible as a desirable destination, even as students' lived experiences reveal the limits of translating that promise into daily security.

Theme 1 also demonstrates that the "Canada as imagined refuge" narrative is rescaled after arrival: participants' experiences are shaped less by "Canada" in the abstract than by "Canada-here," the specific small Ontario city where they live and study. This shift is not merely

a matter of individual disappointment; it is structurally produced by the conditions of small-city settlement. Small-city life intensifies recognizability, narrows the range of queer spaces and events, and limits the protective anonymity that larger urban centres can provide. In the literature, these dynamics are central to why small cities matter analytically: queer infrastructures tend to be concentrated in large urban centres, leaving smaller locales with fewer formal support networks, fewer queer-affirming services (including culturally sustaining health care), and often a more conservative or less visibly allied public culture (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Hulko, 2018; Hulko & Hovanes, 2017). Participants' narratives mirror this place-based constraint in the language of scale and scarcity. Ravi, for instance, described arriving with an expectation of broader queer social circles and discovered that local 2SLGBTQ+ groups existed "on a very smaller scale." Fatima framed the queer dating pool as "the size of a puddle," where social worlds felt so tight that "every person I talked to,… they have been with my friends [or] they know my friends." These accounts do not reduce small-city life to deficiency; they show how smallness functions as a social condition that reorganises visibility, access, and risk. For Mario, the city's small scale was initially welcomed as manageable, quiet, less overwhelming, and a way to adjust "little by little." Yet, even this more ambivalent appreciation underscores the same structural point: small-city settlement is not simply a geographic backdrop but an ecology of limited infrastructures and high recognizability that shapes what "refuge" can mean in practice.

Intersectionality tightens this analysis by showing how the move from "Canada" to "Canada-here" is experienced differently, and often more sharply, depending on participants' racialisation, language and accent, religion, gender expression, and status precarity. The imagined refuge is never accessed on queer terms alone. Even within Theme 1, participants' recalibrations of safety are frequently narrated through compound vulnerability: Alex captured

the everyday "limbo" of anticipating whether people are "going to be racist… or are they going to be transphobic… or both," while others described how whiteness shaped the feel of queer spaces and events, including the racial composition of drag scenes and the absence of visible cultural diversity. These accounts illustrate a core intersectional mechanism: legal rights and national reputation can coexist with daily life that is structured by racialised encounter and differential belonging. Importantly, the "refuge" story is not simply corrected by experience; it is *reworked*. Many participants retain the comparative claim that Canada is "better than home," but revise it into a conditional shelter: protections exist, but everyday life still requires ongoing risk assessment, and small-city contexts intensify exposure in ways that can be both stabilizing and dangerous. In this sense, "rights on paper" do not straightforwardly translate into embodied safety; they become one resource among many in a place-specific negotiation shaped by who can be recognised as legitimate, who is read as "out of place," and whose visibility attracts heightened surveillance.

Through the combined lens of intersectionality and neoliberalism, Theme 1 also explains the persistent presence of what I conceptualize as an "urban horizon": large urban centres (often Toronto in participants' accounts) function as a future-oriented container for the queer life that feels missing or difficult to access in a small city, such as denser community, greater anonymity, more specialized health services, and a wider range of venues and relationship possibilities. Such a horizon does two things at once. First, it allows participants to preserve the national imaginary (Canada can be queer-possible) while relocating that possibility to specific metropolitan infrastructures (but not here, not in this city, not yet). Second, it reveals how neoliberal constraints shape even the imagined solution: the ability to access the urban horizon is unevenly distributed, mediated by money, transport, time, and the burdens of planning (as well as, for

some, anxiety about large cities). The "urban horizon" is therefore not merely a preference for big-city culture; it is a spatial strategy for liveability that simultaneously highlights structural scarcity in small cities and the unequal accessibility of "elsewhere." This interpretation speaks directly to my study's research questions by showing (RQ1) how queerness shapes everyday life through place-specific recalibrations of safety and possibility, and (RQ2) how supports and barriers become legible through the infrastructures of small-city settlement, what exists, what is thin, what is inaccessible, and what must be imagined as located elsewhere.

Theme 1, then, sets up the core problem that Theme 2 develops: if "Canada" is not a uniform refuge and small-city life amplifies recognizability, the everyday question becomes not only *where* queer life can be lived, but *how* to live it, through what forms of disclosure, what kinds of presentation, and what strategies of (in)visibility across shifting audiences and contexts.

Theme 2 demonstrates that belonging is not a stable outcome of arrival or legal protection but is negotiated through ongoing identity management work, strategic disclosure, selective silence, bodily presentation, and audience-specific storytelling, under conditions structured by intersectional vulnerability and neoliberal responsibilisation. Interpreting participants' accounts through identity management theory reframes "outness" away from a linear binary (out/closeted) and toward an ongoing communicative practice shaped by risk, audience, and place (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). In this reading, participants' strategic (in)visibility is not merely a private psychological preference; it is a relational and situational strategy for managing identity within shifting contexts where identity is continually *ascribed* by others and must be continually *avowed* or corrected by the self. This maps closely onto Goffman's dramaturgical insight that social life involves front-stage and back-stage performances oriented to different audiences, with "passing," impression management, and face-work operating as survival tactics in environments

where stigma is possible (Goffman, 1959). Participants' narratives illustrate that queer identity is lived as contextual and performative (Butler, 1990), but this performativity is not an abstract theoretical claim: it is experienced as a daily labour of calibrating what can be visible, to whom, and at what cost, particularly within small-city conditions where recognizability and social circulation are intensified.

An intersectional reading clarifies that "audience" is not a single group and that disclosure does not carry uniform consequences. Participants manage multiple audiences that extend beyond the campus and beyond Canada: family members and cultural communities "back home," co-nationals and diasporic networks within the small city, white Canadian peers, queer peers (including queer/pride centres), and institutional actors such as faculty, administrators, healthcare providers, and employers. The same identity statement can carry radically different stakes across these audiences because sexuality and gender are lived alongside racialisation, accent and language, religion, and the administrative constraints of international student status, illustrating why an intersectional lens is helpful (Crenshaw, 1997). In participants' accounts, disclosure is therefore often narrated as *controlled transparency*, being honest if asked while avoiding proactive announcement, because disclosure is not simply self-expression but also a risk event with uneven fallout. This is most visible in the "transnational tether" that participants describe: even while living in Canada, they manage the possibility that information will "travel" back to family or community, reactivating the closet across borders. Their strategies, such as curating social media audiences through "close friends," removing specific relatives from story visibility, withdrawing from platforms when exposure feels unmanageable, or returning to concealment during visits, show that the closet is not left behind through migration; it can be reconstituted through digital infrastructures and kinship surveillance. In this sense, strategic

(in)visibility functions as a form of borderwork: participants are not simply crossing national borders but continuously managing the boundaries between publics, relational obligations, and the unequal conditions of queer liveability across places.

Neoliberalism sharpens this interpretation by making visible how much of this labour is privatized and individualised. Participants' accounts suggest that inclusion is frequently experienced not as guaranteed infrastructure but as something students must *produce* through self-management: deciding when to correct misgendering, whether to disclose to a roommate or professor, how to interpret "inclusive" messaging, and how to navigate support services that may be thin, unfamiliar, or culturally mismatched. I see here an alignment with critiques of neoliberal governance in higher education, where institutions rely on market logics and reputational branding while shifting risk and responsibility onto individuals (Ahmed, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Marginson, 2016). In practical terms, participants describe being compelled to do interpretive and emotional work in spaces that are nominally inclusive: reading a classroom or workplace for safety; choosing whether to "educate" others; assessing whether a pride centre is socially usable; and weighing whether institutional reporting will produce accountability or additional risk and exposure. Even affirming practices, such as pronoun sharing, pride events, and EDID messaging, can become part of this responsibilisation when they are not paired with consistent training for staff, accessible resources, and predictable institutional responses. Under neoliberal conditions, the discourse of "resilience" can quietly naturalize this individualised burden: students are expected to cope, self-advocate, and strategically manage identity to access the very inclusion that institutions claim to offer.

Theme 2 also provides a direct bridge to wellbeing (RQ3) by showing that strategic (in)visibility is not only a social strategy; it is a sustained affective condition. Participants

repeatedly narrate vigilance, keeping one's "guard up," as an ordinary mode of moving through campus and city life, and this is consequential because vigilance consumes attention, depletes emotional resources, and narrows the range of spaces where one can relax into being unremarkable. In the literature, the mental health effects of discrimination, microaggressions, and identity-based surveillance are well established for queer students and for racialised international students (e.g., Dimberg et al., 2021; Houshmand et al., 2014; Jadva et al., 2023). Participants' narratives locate these dynamics not only in overt hostility but in the accumulation of micro-events: deciding whether correction is worth the risk; absorbing remarks that question the legitimacy of one's identity; scanning public space; and bracing for the possibility of racism, transphobia, or both. The wellbeing stakes of strategic (in)visibility become especially visible in accounts of re-closeting and audience management: some participants describe this as "keeping the peace," but also as a direct sacrifice of mental health, particularly when returning home or navigating family surveillance. When belonging requires constant calculation, it becomes a fragile and costly achievement rather than a stable condition, one that is further intensified by the isolating ecology of small-city life (thin queer infrastructure, winter compression of social life, limited anonymity) and by the uncertainty that accompanies international student status.

Finally, it is important to interpret Theme 2 as evidence of constrained rationality rather than personal deficit. Participants' strategic (in)visibility is not best understood as a "lack of courage," insufficient confidence or pride, or incomplete identity development. It is a coherent adaptation to small-city social conditions, intersectional vulnerability, and uneven institutional responsiveness. In this sense, Theme 2 also challenges the implicit normative script of the "liberatory" coming-out narrative that often underpins Western queer imaginaries (Gammon, 2024; Lysne, 2023). Participants' accounts suggest a different model: queer life-making as

calibrated survivability, where authenticity is not measured by maximal visibility but by the ability to sustain safety, relationships, and futures across multiple audiences and uncertain horizons. This interpretation sets up Theme 3 by clarifying that strategic (in)visibility is not only a response to homophobia or transphobia in mainstream spaces but is also shaped by the racialised limits of queer spaces and institutions themselves, where whiteness can organise who is recognised, protected, and invited into belonging.

Theme 3 shows that whiteness structures both mainstream and queer-designated spaces, producing racialised distributions of safety, credibility, and access; through intersectionality and neoliberalism, "inclusion" becomes readable as institutional messaging that can remain thin when not paired with material resources, accountability, and culturally usable support. The contribution of this theme is to make racism and xenophobia visible not as "additional variables" layered onto queer experience, but as foundational conditions that shape queer life in small Ontario cities. Participants frequently describe racism as a more prevalent or immediate feature of everyday life than overt homophobia, experienced through microaggressions, workplace hostility, public harassment, and institutional interactions that mark them as perpetually foreign or conditionally welcome. This pattern aligns with scholarship documenting racial microaggressions toward international students and the structural obstacles embedded in higher education (Cranston & Bennett, 2024; Houshmand et al., 2014), but Theme 3 extends this insight by showing how racialisation reorganises queer belonging specifically: it shapes who can inhabit public space without being questioned, who can access queer community without being tokenized, and who can trust institutional protections without anticipating dismissal. In small-city contexts, where public life may be more tightly networked and where demographic

whiteness is more salient, racialisation becomes a central determinant of how "safe" Canada can feel in practice, even when legal rights and inclusive messaging are visible.

Intersectionality does the explanatory work by clarifying the "double bind" participants describe: the push to choose between spaces that are racially tolerable but queer-hostile and spaces that are queer-affirming but racially alienating. Participants narrate a fractured landscape of partial belonging in which no single space reliably holds all aspects of the self. This is not simply a matter of preference; it is a structural predicament produced by the uneven distribution of stigma across social worlds. In mainstream spaces (workplaces, public streets, customer-facing roles, institutional front desks), racialisation marks participants as out of place; in queer-designated spaces (campus pride centres, queer events), whiteness can still operate as a social norm that organises who feels like an insider. Participants' descriptions of queer spaces as "Canadianised," "whitewashed," or governed by white cultural reference points reveal that queer inclusion is not automatically anti-racist. Rather, whiteness can become the unspoken standard of what queer life looks like, what counts as a legitimate struggle, and what emotional registers are acceptable. This shows up not only as numerical dominance (who is in the room) but as normative dominance (whose humour, vulnerability, conversational style, and cultural knowledge define the space). The effect is that racialised queer students may have access to queer spaces "on paper" yet still experience them as socially difficult to enter, emotionally unsafe, or unable to hold "heavier" migration narratives and traumas. Theme 3 also extends the analysis to queer sociality beyond formal spaces, including the racial politics of desirability in app culture and dating economies, where racialised bodies can be fetishized, excluded, or rendered disposable. These dynamics underscore that queer community is not outside power; it is another site where power circulates through racial hierarchy.

Neoliberal critiques of inclusion help interpret why these racialised harms can coexist with strong institutional narratives of diversity and pride visibility. In the literature that I reviewed in Chapter 2, EDID is positioned as complex: it can be mobilized as transformative practice, but it can also be co-opted as institutional branding and reputational management within neoliberal higher education (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Mohanty, 2003). Theme 3 shows how this tension is lived. Participants describe campuses where signs of inclusion, such as pride messaging, queer centres, and visible celebrations, are present yet where racialised students encounter “crickets” when naming racism or experience “inclusion” as a surface layer that does not consistently translate into protection, responsiveness, or culturally meaningful support. The gap between symbolic inclusion and material usability is central: a pride centre can exist, but be culturally narrow; reporting pathways can exist, but feel unpredictable; and affirming language can circulate, while microaggressions and tokenizing talk remain unaddressed. Reading through scholarship on neoliberalism, this is not accidental. It reflects how institutions can maximize visible commitments at relatively low cost while leaving the costly work of anti-racist transformation, staffing, training, accountability systems, culturally specific programming, and sustained community partnerships as partial or discretionary.

Theme 3 also invites an interpretation of institutional unevenness as structural rather than exceptional. Participants described support as contingent on individual staff members, individual professors, or particular administrators: one person “gets it,” another does not; one class feels safe, another feels hostile; one service interaction is affirming, another is damaging. From a neoliberal governance perspective, this patchwork is a recognizable organisational form: supports operate as fragmented and individualised rather than guaranteed and rights-based, and responsibility for navigating inconsistency falls back onto the student (Giroux, 2002; Harvey,

2005; Marginson, 2016). Such structural unevenness is especially consequential for queer and trans participants whose recognition is mediated through institutional routines (names on IDs, gendered greetings, pronoun use, forms that require disclosure) and for racialised international students whose legitimacy is repeatedly questioned through everyday institutional interactions. When institutional inclusion depends on discretionary competence rather than systematic practice, the labour of making inclusion real is offloaded onto those most vulnerable: the student must decide whether to correct, whether to report, whether to risk retaliation or exposure, and whether institutional processes are worth the emotional cost. Theme 3 therefore does not simply identify racism "alongside" queer experience; it shows how institutional organisation and racial hierarchy jointly shape the practical conditions under which queer life can be lived.

Finally, Theme 3 explains Theme 2's strategic (in)visibility. Visibility is costly when whiteness structures both public life and queer-designated spaces, because "being seen" entails more than being read as queer; it also entails being read through racialised scripts of belonging and foreignness. Under these conditions, strategic invisibility is not only a response to heteronormativity; it is also a response to the likelihood of racialised harm and to the uncertainty of whether "inclusive" spaces will actually function as safe spaces for racialised queer international students. In relation to the research questions, Theme 3 directly addresses (RQ2) the uneven supports and barriers participants encounter across campus and community infrastructures, and (RQ3) how these uneven conditions shape belonging and wellbeing through stress, alienation, and the fragmentation of community. In this way, Theme 3 completes the analytic arc begun in Theme 1 and developed in Theme 2: the "Canada as refuge" narrative becomes conditional through place, and that conditionality is lived through identity management

strategies that are made necessary, yet never fully resolved, by racialised power relations and neoliberal institutional arrangements.

5.2 Cross-theme Synthesis

Rights and inclusion can be visible “on paper” and in institutional messaging, whereas daily life is shaped by exposure, racialised dynamics within and beyond queer communities, uneven institutional responsiveness, and the constant pressure of migration-related uncertainty. Read together, Themes 1–3 show that queer international students’ lives in small Ontario cities are organised by a recurring paradox: formal rights and symbolic inclusion coexist with everyday conditions that demand constant calculation, leaving belonging and wellbeing contingent rather than secured. Theme 1 locates the paradox at the level of narrative expectation and place: Canada is imagined as a safer horizon for queer life, yet that promise becomes materially conditional when it is lived through the infrastructures and social ecology of a small city, thin queer networks, heightened recognizability, limited anonymity, and uneven access to specialised supports. Theme 2 shows how this conditionality becomes an everyday practice: students negotiate their place in the city and institution through strategic (in)visibility, disclosure, concealment, and embodied presentation calibrated to particular audiences and settings. Theme 3 identifies why these calculations are not evenly distributed: whiteness shapes institutional life and queer community spaces, producing racialised distributions of comfort, credibility, and safety, and generating the “double bind” in which racialised queer students must navigate racism in mainstream spaces while also encountering “Canadianised” or white-dominant norms in queer-designated spaces. Taken together, the themes demonstrate that queer life in small Ontario cities is not simply facilitated by national rights frameworks or campus inclusion discourse; it is

assembled through ongoing negotiation at the intersection of place, race, status, and institutional infrastructure.

Reading these themes together makes visible how the forces shaping participants' lives are not separate and additive, but relational and mutually reinforcing. The "imagined refuge" of Theme 1 does not only set up disappointment; it helps explain why subsequent identity work is saturated with both hope and vigilance. The thin queer infrastructure and heightened visibility of small-city life amplify the stakes of disclosure, making "being known" more consequential and harder to reverse, which in turn intensifies the strategic identity management practices documented in Theme 2. At the same time, the racialised dynamics highlighted in Theme 3 shape which spaces are usable once students seek connection and support: the decision to enter queer spaces, speak up in institutional settings, or "be out" in public is shaped not only by anticipated queerphobia but by the likelihood of racialised misrecognition, tokenisation, or dismissal. Migration-related uncertainty further binds these processes together by placing the future itself under conditional terms. Participants' narratives show that immigration status is not merely an administrative backdrop; it operates as an affective horizon that informs present-day risk calculus, including the possibility of "return imaginaries" that reactivate closet logics and constrain what becomes sayable or visible in the present. This is why the paradox at the centre of the study cannot be resolved by pointing to national rights alone: safety and belonging are lived through infrastructures, institutional response, and the uneven distribution of recognition across racialised and migratory lines.

This paradox is most clearly explained when intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism are brought into conversation together rather than treated as separate interpretive tools. Intersectionality clarifies that "queer international student" is not a single-axis

position (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1997); it is a location where sexuality and/or gender identity are lived through racialisation, nationality, religion, language and accent, class, and precarious or uncertain status. This lens explains why legal inclusion can coexist with felt vulnerability: "the same" rights regime can be experienced differently depending on who is read as belonging, whose body is treated as suspicious or foreign, and whose safety is undermined by racism even within spaces marked as queer affirming. Identity management theory then explains the everyday mechanics through which this layered vulnerability is navigated: participants' disclosures, silences, and presentation choices are not idiosyncratic personality traits but communicative strategies shaped by audience, relational context, and perceived risk (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). In the findings, identity is managed across multiple publics (family and community "back home," co-nationals and diaspora networks, white Canadian peers, queer peers, staff and faculty), and this management is intensified by small-city recognizability, where social information circulates quickly and anonymity is limited. Finally, neoliberalism provides the structural context that links national and institutional imaginaries to lived precarity. Participants' narratives resonate with the critique that international education is increasingly marketised and reputationally managed, and that institutions can display inclusion symbolically while downloading risk and responsibility onto individuals (Ahmed, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Marginson, 2016). In combination, then, these lenses explain the study's central paradox: intersectionality identifies how vulnerability is layered and unevenly distributed; identity management theory explains the tactical work students do to live within those layers; and neoliberalism explains why that tactical work becomes individualised labour in a context where inclusion is visible yet inconsistently resourced and unevenly enacted.

This synthesis also offers a clear crosswalk to the research questions. RQ1 asked how queerness shapes participants' educational experiences and everyday life in small Ontario cities. Read across themes, the answer is that queerness shapes everyday life not simply through identity content but through place-specific recalibration of safety (Theme 1) and through ongoing identity management strategies, selective disclosure, embodied presentation, and audience-specific narration, required to move through classrooms, residences, workplaces, and public space in a context of heightened visibility (Theme 2). RQ2 asked what supports and barriers participants encounter. The themes collectively show that supports exist but are uneven and often thin: queer infrastructures in small cities may be present but limited in scale; institutional supports may depend on specific individuals rather than predictable systems; and queer-designated spaces may provide resources while remaining socially structured by whiteness, which can limit their usability for racialised international students (Themes 1 and 3). RQ3 asked how these experiences shape belonging and wellbeing. The synthesis here is that belonging is conditional rather than secured: vigilance (the need to "guard up"), the emotional cost of continuous calculation, racialised microaggressions, and the persistent pressure of migration-related uncertainty combine to shape wellbeing, sometimes producing loneliness, hypervigilance, and exhaustion even when overt hostility is not constant (Themes 2 and 3). In other words, my research does not suggest that participants are uniformly unsafe or uniformly excluded; it shows that wellbeing is organised by contingency, by the need to continuously assess conditions, calibrate visibility, and anticipate shifting risks.

A composite synthesis illustrates how these dynamics converge in lived experience. Consider a participant who arrives with Canada imagined as a comparatively queer-possible destination, drawn by the promise of legal protections, social acceptance, and the possibility of

building a life less governed by familial surveillance (Theme 1). After settling in a small Ontario city, they encounter an environment where queer community is present but small, where the dating and social pool is tightly networked, and where anonymity is limited. They may learn quickly that "Canada" is not the same as "Canada-here": campus inclusion symbols exist, yet the everyday reality of public space still requires vigilance, particularly as a racialised person navigating microaggressions or xenophobic hostility (Theme 3). As they seek community, they may approach queer-designated spaces for support while also finding that whiteness and "Canadianised" norms shape who feels immediately at ease, what kinds of topics are welcomed, and how stories of migration, trauma, or racism are received (Theme 3). In response, they develop a repertoire of strategic (in)visibility (Theme 2): they are "out" in selected contexts but not universally; they curate their social media to prevent information from reaching family or diaspora networks; they decide when it is worth correcting misgendering or challenging a comment; and they navigate the present with the future in mind, aware that immigration pathways and policy environments may shift and that "return" could mean re-closeting or losing hard-won relational supports. This composite account captures the study's central contribution: the conditions of queer liveability in small cities are produced through the interaction of place-specific infrastructures, racialised dynamics, and migration uncertainty, and the burden of stitching these together is too often placed on students as individualised labour rather than addressed through dependable institutional and community support.

Building from this cross-theme synthesis, the next section turns to implications. If the central finding is that inclusion can be visible while belonging remains contingent, then practical responses must shift from symbolic recognition to materially usable supports. This requires attention to the institutions that structure everyday life in small Ontario cities, universities and

colleges, local service ecologies, and the broader immigration policy context that shapes status uncertainty. The next section therefore outlines implications that move beyond generalised commitments to inclusion toward concrete practices of resourcing, accountability, cultural usability, and coordinated support, with particular attention to the needs of racialised queer international students navigating visibility, belonging, and uncertain futures.

5.3 Implications

The findings suggest that the core issue is not the *absence* of inclusion discourse. Rather, the issue is the gap between inclusion as symbolic visibility (e.g., pride messaging, “welcoming” narratives, nominally inclusive policy language) and inclusion as materially usable infrastructure. Students need an infrastructure they can access without heightened exposure, without cultural mismatch, and without having to convert every interaction into individualised identity labour. Themes 1–3 show that, in small Ontario cities, queer international students often live under conditions of intensified recognizability and thin queer infrastructure; navigate belonging through strategic (in)visibility across multiple audiences (including transnational ones); and encounter the structuring force of whiteness across institutional and queer-designated spaces. Taken together, these conditions make “support” less a one-time provision and more a matter of design, that is, how institutions organise access, confidentiality, accountability, cultural usability, and the distribution of responsibility for safety and belonging.

5.3.1 Implications for Universities and Colleges

The implications that follow are intentionally place- and population-specific. Universities and colleges in small Ontario cities are key sites where “inclusion” can either remain symbolic or become materially usable, particularly for racialised queer international students navigating visibility, belonging, and migration uncertainty. Because small-city social worlds tend to be

tight, supports must be designed with the recognition that simply “showing up” to a queer service can constitute unwanted disclosure. Because participants described whiteness as shaping even queer spaces, inclusion must be approached as explicitly anti-racist and intersectional rather than as sexuality- and gender-only programming. And because neoliberal institutional conditions often shift the burden of navigation onto individuals, the findings point to the need for institutions to move away from discretionary, individualised “good luck” support and toward predictable systems that reduce students’ need to self-manage risk (Ahmed, 2012; Marginson, 2016). This does not mean treating students as passive recipients; it means reducing the structural conditions that make survival-level calculation the default mode of participation.

A first implication is the need to shift from “safe space exists” to “safe space functions.” Participants’ accounts show that the existence of pride/queer centres, pride events, or inclusive messaging is not the same as practical access, especially in small-city contexts where being seen entering a queer-designated space can itself be consequential. Institutions need to pay attention to mundane conditions that determine usability: the visibility and location of queer services; consistent and accessible hours; the clarity of online information for students who cannot rely on insider networks; and orientation practices that introduce queer supports in a way that is not premised on public self-identification. A “functioning” safe space also means designing for privacy by default, for example, offering low-barrier ways to access information and support without requiring in-person presence, facilitating confidential appointment pathways, and building mechanisms for students to participate without being immediately “outed” within tight campus networks. These design shifts respond directly to Theme 2’s finding that many participants manage belonging through strategic (in)visibility and weigh disclosure costs in everyday decisions, not only in dramatic “coming out” moments.

Second, the findings point to the importance of training plus accountability as routine institutional infrastructure rather than optional goodwill. Participants described support as inconsistent and dependent on individual staff or faculty members, which produces an additional burden: students must continually assess whether it is worth correcting misgendering, disclosing identity, or reporting harm. This patchwork is consequential because it pushes identity management work onto those most exposed to the costs of misrecognition. Institutions can reduce this individualised labour by implementing role-specific training that integrates: queer and trans competency (e.g., pronoun practices, chosen-name practices, non-gendered forms of address in frontline services, respectful responses to correction); and anti-racist and anti-xenophobic competency (e.g., recognizing racial microaggressions, accent and language bias, and the racialised assumptions that position international students as perpetually foreign). Critically, training must be paired with predictable response pathways: clear reporting options, protection from retaliation, transparent outcomes, and forms of institutional follow-through that do not depend on the student's capacity to "prove" harm. Where participants perceive that consequences are unlikely or that response is discretionary, the rational outcome is under-reporting and increased self-management, precisely the dynamic Themes 2 and 3 highlight. Making inclusion structurally reliable therefore requires that institutions treat respectful recognition not as interpersonal etiquette but as a baseline condition of participation, enforced through policy and practice.

Third, following scholarship on culturally responsive or culturally sustaining pedagogies, universities and colleges should design culturally usable programming rather than assuming that generic pride events or broadly defined 2SLGBTQ+ spaces will meet the needs of queer international students, particularly those who are racialised. Theme 3 shows that queer-

designated spaces can be experienced as "Canadianised" or white-dominant, welcoming in principle, yet socially difficult to enter or emotionally unsafe when racialised harm is minimized, cultural references are narrowly shared, or "heavier" migration narratives are implicitly discouraged. An implication here is that equity-oriented programming must be intersectional *in its structure*, not only in its stated values. This can include facilitated groups or peer mentorship specifically for queer international students and queer students of colour; co-created programming with international student offices and racialised student associations; and event formats that explicitly acknowledge transnational tethering, family surveillance, and return imaginaries as part of queer life-making rather than treating these issues as peripheral. Importantly, "safe space" norms themselves may need to be rethought: a space can protect participants from harm while still being capable of holding difficult narratives. Participants' suggestions for differentiated sessions, where some gatherings are explicitly framed as appropriate for "heavy topics," can be interpreted as a practical design approach for supporting queer migrants whose experiences of queerness may be inseparable from trauma, coercion, and ongoing transnational risk.

Finally, the implications for institutions must include a frank resource logic grounded in the political economy of internationalisation. My review of literature situates Canadian higher education within neoliberal dynamics where international student tuition has become a crucial revenue stream and "inclusion" can be mobilized as a reputational asset (Ahmed, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Marginson, 2016). Theme 1 suggests that students' imaginaries of Canada as a queer-possible place are shaped partly through these reputational circuits, while Themes 2 and 3 show the everyday costs when support systems are thin, inconsistent, or culturally narrow. An institutional implication is therefore to not only "add programming" but to

address the mismatch between the scale of international recruitment and the thinness of support infrastructures that make inclusion materially real, especially in small cities where community services are limited and the institution becomes a primary access point. Such addressing includes stable staffing for queer and international student services, resourcing for anti-racism and queer/trans competency training, adequate counselling capacity with culturally responsive and queer-affirming approaches, and support mechanisms that recognise the compounded pressures international students face (financial, administrative, and social). In short, if institutions benefit materially from international tuition and symbolically from inclusion branding, then ethical practice requires investing in the infrastructures that reduce precarity and make belonging realistically attainable rather than individually self-managed.

5.3.2 Implications for Small-city Community Supports and Local Services

Because small-city social worlds are tight and highly visible, queer international students' access to safety and wellbeing depends not only on campus supports but also on the broader service ecology of the city. A first implication is that local services, health care, counselling, social service and settlement organisations, municipal programs, and community-based 2SLGBTQ+ initiatives, need capacity that is simultaneously queer-affirming and anti-racist, rather than treating these as separate "diversity" competencies. The analysis shows that participants' daily safety calculations in small Ontario cities were shaped not only by cisheteronormativity but by racialisation and xenophobia in ordinary public encounters (e.g., workplaces, stores, public space), and by whiteness operating as a norm even within queer-designated spaces.

The implication is that service providers who are positioned as "neutral" or "generic" (e.g., front-desk staff, intake workers, clinicians, municipal staff, community program

facilitators) are often the first institutional interface students encounter, and those interfaces can either reduce or intensify minority stress. In small cities, where fewer providers serve larger catchment areas, even one culturally unsafe interaction can have an outsized impact because "alternative options" are limited. Community services therefore require training and practice standards that treat (1) respectful naming and pronoun practices, (2) culturally responsive mental health care for queer migrants, and (3) anti-racist service delivery (including recognition of racial microaggressions and accent bias) as baseline conditions of ethical care, not optional "extra" skills. These are not merely interpersonal niceties; they are structural supports that can reduce the everyday labour participants described, labour that accumulates across service interactions and shapes whether students view help-seeking in the city as possible or too risky.

A second implication concerns information infrastructure. A recurring theme across the findings is that resources in small cities can be thin, dispersed, and difficult to locate, sometimes existing in principle but remaining practically inaccessible because students do not know they exist or do not know how to approach them without unwanted exposure. This suggests that community supports must be designed to be *findable* without insider networks. In small cities, new international students may not have access to the informal pathways through which local knowledge is typically shared ("you only know if someone tells you"). Consequently, municipalities, community organisations, and campus–community partnerships can reduce barriers by maintaining a centralized, regularly updated directory of queer-affirming and culturally sustaining services (including health care, counselling, peer support groups, crisis supports, and legal/immigration resources), written in clear language and distributed through multiple entry points: newcomer settlement agencies, campus orientations, libraries, health clinics, and online platforms. Where possible, information should include practical "how-to"

details that make access real: how to book, whether drop-in is possible, privacy expectations, cost, transportation options, and whether services are experienced as welcoming to racialised queer newcomers. Designing information this way matters because it reduces the interpretive work that participants repeatedly described, work that requires them to assess risk and cultural fit before seeking support, often while already carrying stress and isolation.

Third, community supports in small cities should treat confidentiality and trust-building as design requirements, not simply as professional ethics assumed to be sufficient. In a small city, the act of entering a queer service, an 2SLGBTQ+ event, a sexual health clinic, a counselling office, or even a specific community venue can function as unchosen disclosure because of heightened recognizability and network density. This is especially consequential for queer international students who described transnational tethering (family surveillance, diaspora monitoring, and return imaginaries), because the stakes of being "seen" locally can reverberate across borders. In practical terms, this implies that local services should prioritize privacy-by-default access options: discreet appointment scheduling; clear confidentiality explanations at intake; culturally aware approaches to documentation and communication; and the availability of virtual/telehealth services where appropriate. It also implies the importance of building services that do not require public self-identification as queer to access support, for example, embedding queer-affirming counselling within broader wellness programs while ensuring staff competency and visible assurances of inclusivity. The goal is not to "hide" queer services but to reduce the structural dilemma participants described: that seeking support can itself create exposure. When confidentiality and trust are treated as central design features, community services can become part of the infrastructure that enables belonging rather than another site where students must weigh whether help-seeking is worth the risk.

5.3.3 Implications for the Immigration Policy Context and Status Precarity

Participants' narratives show that immigration uncertainty is not merely administrative stress; it is a structuring condition that shapes queer life-making, belonging, and wellbeing by making the future, and therefore identity stability, conditional.

A first implication is that status precarity must be treated as a queer issue, not only an international student services issue. In the analysis, participants' "transnational tether" and "return imaginaries" demonstrate that future uncertainty reshapes present-day identity practice: disclosure decisions, digital boundary work, and participation in queer community are made with an eye to possible consequences if immigration pathways narrow or if students must return to contexts where queerness is less liveable. This means that immigration governance is not external to queer wellbeing; it can reactivate closet logics, constrain relational possibilities, and intensify the emotional cost of living a "split-audience" life across borders. In practical terms, queer-inclusive student support systems should therefore integrate immigration advising as part of queer liveability infrastructure, particularly in small cities where students have fewer alternative supports and where the costs of error or misinformation are high.

Second, the broader policy environment underscores the need to address the institutional offloading of risk onto international students, an offloading that aligns with neoliberal dynamics discussed in the literature review, where institutions benefit from internationalisation while students absorb precarity. Immigration policies that frequently shift without warning contribute to a climate of uncertainty for international students: students must plan educational, housing, employment, and relationship futures in a shifting policy landscape. Policy changes also extend into the post-graduation transition. For instance, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada indicated that, as of November 1, 2024, most post-graduation work permit (PGWP) applicants

must provide proof of language results when applying (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2026). For some non-degree programs, PGWP eligibility has also been tied to completing programs in fields linked to labour market shortages, with the eligible fields list subject to update (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2026).

Policy changes in Canada are often abrupt and retroactive in nature, placing international students in vulnerable and uncertain circumstances. For instance, international students enrolled in graduate programs are no longer eligible to bring their spouses to Canada on a spousal open work permit unless they are employed in occupations classified under TEER categories 0, 1, 2, or 3. Graduates working in TEER 4 and 5 occupations are not eligible (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2026). For queer folks, their partners are often their sole support, as highlighted by Juan. This policy sounds like international students do not have human needs such as being able to live with their partners if they are not contributing to the economy through a TEER 0, 1, 2 or 3 jobs.

Prime Minister Carney's government recently introduced Bill C-12, following widespread mobilisation by immigrants to oppose Bill C-2 (Baxter, 2025). However, Bill C-12 largely replicates the provisions of its predecessor, just under a new designation. It represents a significant statutory restructuring of Canada's immigration and refugee protection regime (Parliament of Canada, 2025), with particularly severe implications for 2SLGBTQ+ international students who have been residing in Canada for more than one year. The bill has passed the House of Commons but cannot become a law until the next seating of Senate (McGregor, 2025). Unlike prior immigration reforms that operated primarily through ministerial policy or administrative discretion, Bill C-12 embeds restrictive measures directly into legislation. This shift substantially narrows opportunities for individualised assessment and post-hoc correction of

harm. Most critically, the bill introduces a one-year temporal bar on refugee eligibility, retroactively applied to June 2020. For queer international students, this provision is especially punitive. Sexual and gender-based persecution often escalates unpredictably, through sudden legal changes, moral panics, regime shifts, or targeted crackdowns.

Bill C-12 effectively denies protection to those whose risk materializes after arrival, despite their continued presence and integration in Canada. Bill C-12 signals a broader policy shift away from individualised humanitarian assessment toward administrative efficiency and categorical exclusion. For queer international students already studying in Canada, the legislation produces a legal paradox: prolonged residence and educational contribution no longer strengthen protection claims but instead operate as grounds for disqualification. In contexts where home countries become newly or increasingly hostile to queer people, Bill C-12 leaves this population with virtually no lawful pathway to seek refuge in Canada, despite their established presence, social ties, and reliance on Canadian institutions for safety.

These changes would have particularly adverse consequences for queer individuals who initially entered Canada as international students. Those unable to obtain permanent residency due to lower Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) scores would become ineligible to claim refugee protection, as their duration of stay in Canada would exceed one year, even if the situation in their home country is hostile. Such fears are apparent across the participants' narratives. In combination, these changes intensify the burden on students to interpret policy shifts, manage compliance, and somehow anticipate future eligibility rules, often while also navigating racism, queerphobia, and small-city infrastructural scarcity.

Third, the findings point to concrete supports that could reduce this precarity by shifting from a model where students must "figure it out" individually to one where institutions and

communities provide coordinated, transparent infrastructure. While universities and colleges cannot control federal immigration policy, they can reduce the harm of uncertainty by: (1) integrating immigration advising with queer-affirming and anti-racist support services (so that immigration support does not require students to compartmentalize identity or re-enter culturally unsafe spaces); and (2) building proactive "transition supports" around key migration stages (study permit renewal, work authorisation transitions, PGWP applications, and longer-term pathways students may be considering). This coordination is especially important in small-city contexts because students have fewer external legal and settlement resources to fall back on, and the ones that exist can be unaffordable for students and recent graduates. Community legal clinics and settlement agencies can also play a key role, particularly if partnered with campuses to offer confidential referrals, workshops, and one-on-one advising that explicitly addresses the unique risks queer students may face (e.g., privacy concerns, family surveillance, and partner/relationship complexities). Finally, the broader implication is an ethical one: if Canada's higher education and immigration systems continue to rely on international students as economic contributors, then institutions and policymakers have obligations to ensure that the pathways they implicitly promote (study → work → longer-term stability) are navigable, transparent, and supported, so that "queer futures" are not left to hinge on individual luck, unofficial information networks, or the capacity to absorb prolonged uncertainty alone.

5.4 Methodological Reflections and Limitations

In this section, I reflect on how my methodological approach shaped what became visible in the dataset and how I developed the analytic claims presented in Chapter 4. As a thematic narrative analysis informed by reflexive thematic analysis, the study was designed to foreground

participants' meaning-making and the story-structure through which they made sense of queerness, migration, and place.

In the discussion that follows, I first offer my methodological reflections, focusing on what this approach enabled analytically (e.g., attention to temporality, place, and identity negotiation) and how the interview context shaped the production of knowledge. I then turn to limitations, treating them as boundary conditions that clarify scope rather than as weaknesses that invalidate the findings.

5.4.1 Methodological Reflections

As a thematic narrative analysis, this study prioritizes participants' meaning-making and the temporal and place-based structure of their stories, which shapes what becomes visible in the dataset. A central strength of the approach is that it makes temporality analytically productive. Across interviews, many participants did not narrate queer life in Canada as a static condition but as a sequence: pre-migration imaginaries and decisions, the early period of arrival, adjustment and recalibration, and then ongoing life-making within small-city constraints. Treating these as narrative arcs, rather than fragmenting accounts into decontextualised "themes only," helped me interpret the persistent tension between "Canada" as an imagined national refuge and "Canada-here" as a place-specific lived reality. This analytic orientation is also what enabled the findings to register how conditional safety is produced over time: not simply as an initial disappointment but as a continuous recalibration shaped by thin queer infrastructures, heightened recognizability, and shifting perceptions of risk. In other words, the narrative structure of participants' accounts is not merely a stylistic feature; it is an empirical clue about how queer international students make sense of mobility, belonging, and futurity.

The thematic narrative approach also sharpened the role of place as a shaping condition rather than a neutral container for experience. In Chapter 4, I approached "small city" not as a demographic descriptor alone but as a social ecology, one characterised by limited anonymity, dense social circulation, and relatively thin queer infrastructure. This framing matters methodologically because it prevented the analysis from defaulting to individualised explanations (e.g., "students are cautious" or "students are lonely") when participants were describing place-mediated structures that make caution and loneliness rational responses. Attending to place as an analytic dimension also made it possible to interpret "strategic (in)visibility" as spatially and socially organised: a patterned way of moving through streets, classrooms, residences, queer spaces, workplaces, and transnational digital environments under conditions where being "seen" can carry unequal costs.

A second methodological reflection concerns co-construction and reflexivity in the interview setting. The interviews did not produce "raw data" detached from context; they produced accounts shaped by the interactional and ethical conditions of speaking to a researcher about sexuality, gender, race, status, and safety. This is especially salient given the population and context: queer international students in small cities often described heightened exposure and surveillance, and some narrated ongoing transnational tethering (e.g., family monitoring, diaspora risk, and return imaginaries). As a result, what participants chose to disclose, and how they framed it, was likely shaped by a combination of trust, perceived confidentiality, and their own ongoing practices of audience management. Methodologically, I treat this not as a contamination of the findings but as part of what the study reveals: participants' narratives show how they make experience speakable under risk, including the careful staging, withholding, and re-framing that often accompanies queer migration stories.

Third, reflexive thematic analysis shaped how themes function in my dissertation. Rather than presenting themes as objective containers into which excerpts "naturally" fit, I developed themes as interpretive claims about patterned social processes: how safety is imagined and redefined, how belonging is negotiated through visibility and concealment, and how whiteness structures both mainstream and queer-designated spaces. This is an important analytic transparency point. The themes do not claim to exhaust every participant's experience or to represent a statistically generalizable reality. Instead, they synthesize recurring tensions and practices across the dataset, while still acknowledging that these processes were experienced differently depending on positionality and context. Maintaining this interpretive stance also influenced how I used excerpts: participant quotations are presented to preserve the texture of meaning-making and to anchor analytic claims, while avoiding an implication that a quote "proves" a theme on its own.

Finally, confidentiality is not a procedural detail in this study; it is a methodological condition. In small cities where social worlds are dense and recognizability is heightened, even minor identifying details can increase the risk of deductive disclosure. In Chapter 4, I therefore used pseudonyms and minimized identifying details while preserving analytic integrity by, for example, avoiding unnecessary specificity about uniquely identifying incidents, roles, or timelines. I concealed the home countries of the participants and used the continent where their home country is situated. I also categorised their program of study under broader categories, such as STEM or Management. I also did not name the small Ontario cities where they live and study. This decision has analytic consequences: protecting confidentiality can limit the level of contextual detail that can be reported, and it can constrain how precisely events are situated in local institutional histories. However, given the ethical stakes, this trade-off is necessary, and it

aligns with the dissertation's broader argument that small-city conditions intensify visibility and exposure in ways that matter materially for queer international students' lives.

Together, these methodological reflections clarify the kind of knowledge this study produces: it offers an interpretation of shared processes and tensions in the narrated experiences of queer international students in small Ontario cities, shaped by the temporal arcs through which participants tell their stories, the place-specific conditions of small-city life, and the co-constructed nature of qualitative interviewing. The next subsection outlines my study's limitations as scope conditions, clarifying what the findings can and cannot claim, and where further inquiry is needed.

5.4.2 Limitations

The findings of my research should be read as evidence of shared processes and tensions that participants experienced in different ways depending on their positionality and context.

A first limitation concerns scope and context. My research centres queer international students living and studying in small Ontario cities, and the analysis treats "small-city" conditions, thin queer infrastructure, heightened recognizability, and limited anonymity as shaping conditions rather than neutral backdrop. This focus is a strength because it addresses a documented gap in the literature and offers place-specific insight into how national imaginaries ("Canada") become local realities ("Canada-here"). At the same time, it constrains what the findings can claim beyond these contexts. Experiences of queer international students may differ substantially in large metropolitan settings (with denser queer infrastructures and more anonymity), in other provinces/regions (with different political climates and service ecologies), and across different institutional types (e.g., colleges versus universities; commuter campuses versus residential campuses). In other words, the themes are best understood as analytic

propositions about how place, race, institutional unevenness, and status uncertainty interact in small-city contexts rather than as universal statements about queer international students in Canada as a whole.

A second limitation concerns representation and recruitment. With 14 interview participants, the study is designed for depth of interpretation rather than demographic representativeness. Because participation was voluntary, it is possible that some experiences are underrepresented, particularly for those students who are highly closeted, those who perceive participation itself as too risky in a small-city environment, or those who are less connected to campus/community networks through which research often becomes visible. Relatedly, the category “queer international student” encompasses wide variation (sexuality and gender identity, race and ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, class resources, and stage of migration trajectory). While this variation is analytically foregrounded through intersectionality, the sample cannot fully capture the breadth of lived realities across all such positions. The findings should therefore be read as illuminating how particular configurations of identity and context can produce patterned experiences, not as mapping the full distribution of possible experiences within the population.

A third limitation follows from the methodological boundaries of interview-based narrative research. Interviews capture narrated experience: what participants remember, prioritize, and make meaningful in the moment of telling, shaped by the relational and ethical conditions of the interview. This is not a weakness in itself; indeed, it is consistent with the study’s goal of understanding meaning-making and identity negotiation. However, it does mean that the findings should not be read as direct observational evidence of institutional practices or as comprehensive accounts of campus/community environments. For example, while

participants' narratives powerfully demonstrate uneven institutional responsiveness and the racialised dynamics of queer spaces, the study does not directly observe service encounters, classrooms, or queer community events, nor does it adjudicate between institutional perspectives and student accounts. Additionally, the necessary protections against deductive disclosure in small-city contexts required minimizing identifying details, which can limit the specificity with which certain incidents or institutional histories can be reported and compared.

Taken together, these limitations clarify the study's boundary conditions and also point toward the value of future work using comparative and longitudinal designs and expanded methods (e.g., participatory mapping, diaries, ethnographic observation, and multi-site comparison) to test how these processes shift across city sizes, institutional contexts, and stages of migration transition.

5.5 Future Research Directions

The findings and scope conditions outlined above point to several productive directions for future research. Building on the central paradox identified in this dissertation, where rights and institutional inclusion may be visible while everyday life remains shaped by exposure, racialised dynamics, uneven institutional responsiveness, and migration-related uncertainty, future work can deepen, test, and extend these insights across different places, institutional types, and stages of migration.

In particular, future research is needed that: (1) compares small-city contexts with other geographies and institutional configurations; (2) follows queer international students longitudinally across key migration and educational transitions; and (3) expands methodological approaches to capture the spatial, relational, and affective labour of strategic (in)visibility and the racialised organisation of queer community. Such future research directions matter because the

present study suggests that queer liveability is not produced by a single "protective factor" (such as national rights) but by the interaction of infrastructures, institutional governance, racialised power relations, and status precarity, an interaction that is likely to vary across contexts, time, and institutional conditions. Future research also could extend the findings of this study by examining how queer international students' strategies, wellbeing, and institutional experiences shift across different city sizes, program types, and stages of migration status transition.

A first priority is comparative research designs. The analysis shows how "Canada" becomes "Canada-here," and how small-city settlement intensifies recognizability, limits anonymity, and constrains queer infrastructure in ways that shape belonging and identity negotiation. Future studies could compare: (a) small Canadian cities with large metropolitan centres; (b) northern versus southern Ontario settings; and (c) institutions with different profiles (e.g., colleges versus universities; commuter campuses versus residential campuses one province versus another province).

Comparative work would clarify which dynamics are specific to small-city social ecologies (e.g., dense social circulation, thin infrastructure) and which reflect broader patterns of racialisation and institutional unevenness across Canadian higher education. Such comparisons would also make visible how the "urban horizon" operates: whether large-city imaginaries are similarly present, and whether metropolitan queer infrastructures reduce the need for strategic (in)visibility or simply reorganise it under different forms of risk (e.g., different patterns of racism within queer spaces; different distributions of community support).

A second priority is longitudinal research that follows queer international students across key transitions: pre-arrival imaginaries and decision-making; early settlement; deeper immersion into institutional life; graduation; and post-graduation pathways that may include work

authorisation, longer-term status transitions, or return. The present study shows that disclosure and belonging are not stable achievements but ongoing practices shaped by transnational tethering, evolving risk perceptions, and the shifting possibility of future stability. Longitudinal designs could therefore examine how identity management strategies change as students build local networks, become more (or less) confident in institutional responsiveness, and move closer to the migration "pinch points" where uncertainty intensifies. This would be particularly important for understanding how immigration uncertainty functions as a queer issue: how the possibility of return (or future exclusion) shapes disclosure, relationships, and wellbeing over time rather than at a single interview moment. It would also allow future work to examine whether institutional interventions (e.g., culturally usable programming or training/accountability systems) have durable effects on students' experiences or whether such effects are undermined by broader structural pressures (e.g., housing scarcity, employment precarity, or policy volatility).

A third priority is methodological expansion. Interview narratives are powerful for understanding meaning-making, but the findings also point to phenomena that may be particularly well captured through methods that track daily life in situ. Future research could use participatory and place-attentive methods such as diaries or experience sampling (to document how "guard up" vigilance accumulates and fluctuates), participatory mapping or walking interviews (to identify spatial geographies of safety, avoidance, and community), and ethnographic work in queer spaces and service settings (to examine how whiteness and "Canadianised" norms are reproduced interactionally). These approaches would be particularly useful for studying strategic (in)visibility as it occurs across micro-settings (front desks, classrooms, workplaces, residences, transit, social events) and for clarifying the mechanisms

through which disclosure becomes costly in small-city contexts (e.g., recognizability; gossip economies; institutional paperwork; digitized audience monitoring).

Fourth, future research can deepen intersectional specificity by foregrounding dimensions that may require targeted sampling and analysis: trans and nonbinary international students navigating institutional documentation and misrecognition; queer students whose home-country contexts involve criminalisation or intense family surveillance; students who are disconnected from both co-national networks and queer spaces; and students who occupy distinct labour market positions (e.g., those compelled into customer-facing work where xenophobia is experienced more frequently). This is not simply a matter of "adding more groups." It is analytically important because the study's themes suggest that vulnerability and belonging are distributed unevenly across racialisation, gender expression, and status, producing qualitatively different "costs of visibility" and different strategies for sustaining liveability.

Another focused line of inquiry is needed on how neoliberal restructuring of international education and migration governance shapes "queer liveability," particularly through tuition dependence, institutional branding of inclusion, and the offloading of risk onto students. I have three suggestions related to these possible inquiries.

First, while this dissertation uses neoliberalism to interpret the conditions under which queer international students live and study, future research could examine these dynamics more directly by linking macro-level political economy to micro-level identity practice and wellbeing. The literature review emphasises how internationalisation is increasingly entangled with market logics (e.g., revenue dependence on international tuition) and how EDID can be mobilized as competitiveness and branding under neoliberal governance (Ahmed, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2016). The findings then show how "inclusive Canada" and "inclusive

campus" narratives are experienced as conditional in practice, particularly in small-city settings with thin infrastructure and heightened exposure. A targeted research agenda could therefore investigate the *institutional production* of queer-safety imaginaries: how recruitment materials, internationalisation strategies, and diversity communications represent queer acceptance; how students interpret and rely on those narratives in decision-making; and how institutions manage the reputational value of inclusion when everyday support remains patchy or discretionary. This would extend the Theme 1 finding that "Canada as refuge" can function as a reputational promise that becomes reworked into a place-specific and conditional shelter after arrival.

A second strand of inquiry is needed on how neoliberal conditions shape the *material bases* of queer liveability. Participants' accounts suggest that liveability is not only about acceptance but about infrastructures that make safety, privacy, and connection possible such as housing conditions, financial stability, access to culturally sustaining and queer-affirming health care, and predictable institutional response when harm occurs. Future research could examine how tuition dependence and constrained public funding shape what is resourced in small institutions and small cities, and how these resource decisions distribute the burden of identity labour onto students. For example, studies could analyse how staffing levels and service availability (counselling, queer centres, international student advising, reporting systems) correlate with students' reported need for strategic (in)visibility and with wellbeing outcomes (e.g., hypervigilance, isolation, exhaustion). This would move beyond treating "support" as a generic variable and toward analysing support as a governance problem: how institutions allocate responsibility for managing risk and belonging and how this responsibilisation interacts with race and status.

Finally, given the intensifying salience of migration uncertainty in students' narratives, future work should connect neoliberal international education to the shifting terrain of migration governance, including how policy volatility shapes queer futures. Even without centring a specific policy moment, research can examine how changing immigration regimes (and the public narratives that surround them) affect queer international students' disclosure decisions, transnational tethering practices, and future planning, including whether students see permanence as attainable, and what "return" means for identity and wellbeing. This would extend Theme 2's finding that strategic (in)visibility is future-oriented labour and Theme 3's finding that whiteness and racialisation structure belonging within institutions and queer spaces. Taken together, a research program on neoliberalism, international education, and queer liveability can clarify how the promise of inclusion is produced, circulated, and contested, and, crucially, how it becomes materially consequential for students' life chances, mental health, and capacity to inhabit queer futures with stability rather than contingency.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown how the three themes, namely, Canada as Imagined Refuge vs Small-city Reality, Conditional Belonging Through Strategic (In)visibility, and Whiteness as the Default, Racialised Queer Life and the Limits of "Inclusive" Spaces. These themes collectively explain how queer international students navigate safety, supports, belonging, and wellbeing in small Ontario cities under intersecting and neoliberal conditions. Read through the combined lenses of intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism, the findings illuminate a central paradox. Rights and inclusion can be visible in law and institutional messaging, while everyday life remains shaped by heightened exposure in small-city contexts, racialised dynamics within and beyond queer communities, uneven

institutional responsiveness, and the ongoing pressure of migration-related uncertainty. In this sense, "queer safety" is not a stable national attribute that students simply access through migration; it is a place-specific, relational, and infrastructural condition that students are repeatedly compelled to assemble, often through individualised identity labour, within institutional and community environments that are enabling in some moments and constraining in others.

This chapter also directly addresses the study's research questions. RQ1 (How does queerness shape educational experiences and everyday life in small Ontario cities?) is answered by showing that queerness shapes daily life through place-mediated recalibrations of safety and possibility (Theme 1) and through the ongoing, audience- and context-specific identity work required to participate in classrooms, residences, workplaces, and public space (Theme 2). RQ2 (What supports and barriers do participants encounter?) is answered by demonstrating that supports exist but are uneven and sometimes thin; small-city queer infrastructures and campus resources may be present, yet their usability is constrained by recognizability, limited anonymity, and the structuring force of whiteness, including within queer-designated spaces (Themes 1 and 3). Institutional supports are also experienced as inconsistent, often dependent on individual staff members or faculty rather than predictable systems, leaving students to navigate ambiguity and exposure as personal responsibility (Themes 2 and 3). RQ3 (How do these experiences shape belonging and wellbeing?) is answered by showing that belonging is often conditional rather than secured: strategic (in)visibility becomes a rational adaptation to layered vulnerability, but it is also a sustained affective burden, experienced as vigilance, loneliness, exhaustion, and the constant negotiation of transnational risk, especially when immigration futures remain uncertain (Themes 2 and 3).

Finally, this chapter's synthesis clarifies why implications must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward materially usable support: support that is culturally usable, anti-racist, privacy-attentive, and consistently enacted rather than discretionary. The next, and final, chapter builds from these arguments to consolidate the dissertation's overall contribution and to articulate the most actionable recommendations emerging from the study for small-city campuses, local service ecologies, and the broader policy environments that shape queer international students' futures.

Chapter 6: From Suffering to Purpose: Contributions, Implications, and Queer Futures Beyond the Urban Horizon

This dissertation began with an image that is as geographic as it is emotional: snow settling beyond a frosted window in a city that is not Toronto or Vancouver, but a smaller Ontario place where visibility can feel simultaneously protective and precarious. I chose that starting point because it captures the central condition that runs through the narratives shared with me: queer international students in small Ontario cities live in environments where the ordinary acts of student life, such as showing up to class, working a shift, entering a campus service, walking down a street, or posting a story on social media, are saturated with questions of recognition, risk, and belonging. These questions are not asked once and resolved. They recur daily, shaped by place, by migration histories, by family and diasporic ties, and by the uneven infrastructures through which "inclusion" becomes either usable or hollow.

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to consolidate the contributions of this research empirically, theoretically, methodologically, and practically, without simply repeating what has already been presented. I therefore do four things here. First, I restate the study's purpose and research questions and clarify the kind of knowledge this project produces. Second, I synthesize the dissertation's key findings in a way that highlights the social processes at stake rather than re-listing themes. Third, I articulate the dissertation's contributions to scholarship by bringing my theoretical framework into one consolidated account of what this study adds and why it matters. Finally, I close by outlining the broader implications of this work for higher education in Ontario, small-city service ecologies, and policy environments that shape international students' futures, and I reflect on what it has meant to undertake this work as a queer international student

researcher whose scholarship is inseparable from community and from the desire, echoing bell hooks, to make the hurt "speakable" and, in speaking, transformable.

6.1 Purpose, Research Questions, and Scope

My research set out to explore the lived experiences of queer international students in small Ontario cities, with particular attention to how intersecting identities shape educational experiences, everyday life, supports and barriers, belonging, and wellbeing. I approached this inquiry from the position of someone who shares key aspects of participants' social location: I am also a queer international student living in a small Ontario city. That positionality shaped this project from the beginning. It informed not only the urgency of the research question, but also the careful attention to confidentiality, the ethics of recruitment and participation, and the relational dynamics through which interviews were co-constructed as narratives rather than extracted as "data."

The research was guided by three questions: RQ1: *How does being queer shape the educational experiences and daily lives of queer international students in small cities in Ontario?* RQ2: *What institutional and community supports and barriers do these students encounter?* RQ3: *And how do their experiences affect their sense of belonging and well-being?*

The study focused on small Ontario cities with populations up to 150,000 and with limited queer infrastructures relative to large metropolitan centres, an operationalisation grounded in both demographic reasoning and resource-based realities. Importantly, this focus was not simply a geographic narrowing. It was an analytic claim: small cities are distinct social ecologies in which recognizability is heightened, anonymity is harder to sustain, and infrastructures of queer community and culturally responsive support are often thinner. These conditions matter for queer international students because they intensify the consequences of

being seen and reduce the range of spaces where identity can be lived without continuous calculation.

Methodologically, I employed a thematic narrative analysis of 14 interviews, drawing on reflexive thematic analysis in a way that remained attentive to narrative structure and temporality (e.g., before migration, arrival, adjustment, and ongoing life-making). I treated participants' accounts as both descriptive and interpretive. They not only reported experiences but also explained, justified, contested, and made those experiences meaningful in relation to race, gender, sexuality, nationality, class, language, and immigration status. This approach produced knowledge that is not statistically generalizable, but analytically powerful; it identifies shared processes and tensions that recur across stories, while also preserving the nuance of how those processes are experienced differently depending on positionality and context.

Rather than summarizing each chapter, I synthesize the dissertation's core findings as a set of interlinked claims about how queer international students navigate small-city life in Ontario. These claims are grounded in the three themes developed in Chapter 4 and interpreted in Chapter 5 but are presented here in a way that makes visible what the themes do together. They described a patterned condition of queer life-making under intersecting constraints.

A central insight of this dissertation is that "Canada" operates first as an imagined horizon and only later as a lived place, and the shift from imagination to lived reality is mediated by small-city settlement. Participants frequently arrived with Canada understood through reputation: legal protections, narratives of equality, media images of pride, and comparative geopolitical common sense ("safer than home," "safer than the U.S."). Yet the everyday reality participants navigated was not "Canada" in the abstract. It was Canada *here*: particular small Ontario cities with particular infrastructures, demographics, climates, and social dynamics.

This rescaling from "Canada" to "Canada-here" matters because it explains why rights and reputations did not automatically translate into felt safety. In small cities, queer community can exist but remain limited in scale; social worlds are tightly networked; anonymity is harder to maintain; and queer life becomes more legible, and therefore potentially more contestable. Participants did not necessarily reject the idea that Canada offered more breathing room than home; instead, many revised the national narrative into a conditional one. Canada may be safer, but that safety is uneven and must be actively navigated. The dissertation contributes by showing that this conditionality is not a matter of individual pessimism; it is produced by place-based conditions that reorganise visibility, access, and risk.

A second core finding is that belonging in small Ontario cities is not a stable outcome of migration, legal protections, or even participation in queer spaces. It is negotiated through ongoing identity management work that is deeply contextual. Participants described calibrating disclosure across settings (classrooms, workplaces, residences, streets, campus services) and across audiences (family back home, diasporic networks, co-nationals, white Canadian peers, queer peers, faculty and staff). "Outness," in this dataset, was rarely a linear journey from concealment to openness. It is an evolving repertoire of strategies: controlled transparency, selective silence, bodily presentation choices, and audience-specific storytelling.

As my analysis suggests, these strategies are not personal quirks or incomplete "acceptance" but are rational responses to a small-city ecology where being seen can have amplified consequences. In many accounts, the body itself became a site of negotiation, where clothing, voice, gestures, makeup, and other forms of presentation were managed not simply for self-expression but for safety. This visibility work was also tied to wellbeing. The ongoing cognitive and emotional labour of scanning environments, anticipating reactions, deciding

whether correction is worth the cost, and managing exposure across multiple audiences produced exhaustion and vigilance. Belonging, then, was often experienced as conditional: achieved in some moments and spaces, but fragile and reversible in others.

A third major finding is that whiteness operates as a structuring norm in small Ontario cities, not only in public life and institutional routines but also within queer-designated spaces themselves. Participants frequently reported racism and xenophobia as a routine feature of everyday life, sometimes experienced as more frequent than overt homophobia. This racialisation was encountered in workplaces, on public transit, in casual social interactions, and in institutional spaces where "neutrality" masked microaggressions and forms of othering.

Crucially, the research shows that queer spaces are not automatically outside these dynamics. Several participants described pride centres or queer events as "Canadianised," overwhelmingly white, and socially governed by norms that did not always hold the experiences of racialised queer migrants, particularly those experiences that carry "heavier" narratives of stigma, coercion, and trauma. Exclusion did not always take the form of explicit hostility; it can occur through cultural mismatch, tokenisation, silencing of discussions of racism, and the implicit expectation that queer space should be emotionally "light" in ways that do not align with queer migrant realities. This produced a recurring double bind: spaces that felt safer racially can be queer-hostile, while spaces that affirmed queerness can reproduce racial alienation. This research shows how this bind is structural rather than incidental and how it reshapes the conditions under which queer international students attempt to form community and sustain wellbeing.

Taken together, these findings culminate in my central analytic claim. Queer international students in small Ontario cities live a paradox in which rights and inclusion may be visible "on

paper" and in institutional messaging, while daily life remains shaped by exposure, racialised dynamics within and beyond queer communities, uneven institutional responsiveness, and the constant pressure of migration-related uncertainty.

This paradox does not suggest that Canada, or small Ontario cities, are uniformly unsafe. Many participants described meaningful moments of connection, relief, and possibility, including friendships, supportive staff members, and the ability to inhabit queer identities more openly than at home. The point, rather, is that "inclusion" is often inconsistent and contingent. It depends on specific people, specific settings, and specific moments, while the burden of managing the gaps is downloaded onto students themselves. This central paradox is the thread that connects the empirical themes to the theoretical framework. It is where intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism jointly explain why inclusion is unevenly lived and why the labour of making queer life liveable is often individualised.

6.2 Revisiting Findings

Although the dissertation's chapters address the research questions in detail, I think that it is important to state the findings clearly at the end of the study.

6.2.1 RQ1: How Does Being Queer Shape Educational Experiences and Daily Lives in Small Ontario Cities?

Queerness shaped participants' educational and everyday experiences through a place-specific redefinition of what safety and freedom could mean. In small cities, high recognizability and limited queer infrastructure intensified the consequences of visibility. Participants' queer lives were thus shaped by constant decisions about disclosure, presentation, and participation across classrooms, campus services, workplaces, and public spaces. In educational settings, queerness became relevant not only through overt discrimination but through routine

interactions: whether professors used gendered address; whether staff relied on legal names without alternatives; whether peers treated queer identities as legitimate or "up for debate"; and whether queer spaces were socially usable as spaces of support and connection. In everyday city life, queerness shaped movement through public space, assessment of neighbourhoods and venues, and the capacity to be openly relational (e.g., holding hands, speaking about partners) without anticipating negative encounters.

6.2.2 RQ2: What Institutional and Community Supports and Barriers Do Queer International Students Encounter?

Participants encountered supports that were real but uneven. On the one hand, there were institutional resources, queer centres, pride events, individual staff and faculty members who were affirming, and legal protections that framed queer identity as legitimate. On the other hand, barriers emerged as structural patterns: limited scale and accessibility of queer supports in small cities, inconsistent institutional competence (especially around pronouns, chosen names, and anti-racist practice), and patchy responsiveness to reports of discrimination. Community supports were often limited or difficult to locate, and small-city recognizability could make help-seeking feel like unwanted disclosure. Barriers were also produced through whiteness as a structuring norm: racialised queer students encountered racism in mainstream spaces and experienced queer spaces as culturally narrow, leaving them to navigate fractured belonging across different communities.

6.2.3 RQ3: How Do These Experiences Affect Belonging and Wellbeing?

Participants' experiences affected belonging and wellbeing by producing a condition of sustained vigilance and emotional labour. The need to manage visibility and disclosure across multiple audiences, often including transnational audiences, created a heavy mental load.

Racism, xenophobia, microaggressions, and inconsistent institutional response contributed to stress, anger, exhaustion, and sometimes withdrawal from spaces that were supposed to be supportive. At the same time, participants also described resilience and agency: building queer friendships, finding or creating supportive micro-communities, using digital strategies to manage risk, and sustaining hope through urban horizons or future planning. Belonging, therefore, was not absent; it was conditional, uneven, and hard-won, and wellbeing was shaped by both the relief of increased possibility and the cost of living in environments where safety could not be assumed.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions: Why This Research Matters Beyond its Site

One of the core goals of the discussion chapter (Chapter 5), was to interpret the findings through the combined lens of intersectionality, identity management theory, and neoliberalism. The conclusion chapter is where I state the theoretical contribution more explicitly. This dissertation demonstrates that queer international students' lives in small Ontario cities are shaped by the interaction of: (1) interlocking identity-based structures of power and marginalisation; (2) micro-level communicative labour of identity negotiation; and (3) political-economic and institutional arrangements that privatize risk and distribute support unevenly.

6.3.1 Intersectionality: Making Unevenness Central, Not Incidental

Intersectionality is not used in this dissertation as a way to list multiple identities. It is used as an analytic tool to explain why the consequences of visibility, disclosure, and "inclusion" are unevenly distributed. Participants' narratives show that sexuality and gender identity are lived alongside racialisation, nationality, language and accent, religion, class resources, and immigration status. These intersections shaped how participants moved through space, how they were read by others, and how credible and safe they felt when seeking support.

The intersectional contribution of my research is most visible in the analysis of the "double bind" and in the claim that racism and xenophobia are not peripheral to queer life but foundational conditions in small Ontario cities. By centring whiteness as a structuring norm, the study complicates liberal narratives of inclusion that treat legal rights or pride visibility as sufficient indicators of lived equality. Therefore, my research contributes to scholarship by demonstrating how queer community and queer institutional spaces can reproduce racial exclusion and cultural mismatch, and by showing that "queer safety" must be analysed as a compound, intersectional condition rather than as a single-axis achievement.

6.3.2 Identity Management Theory: Reframing Disclosure as Relational Labour

Identity management theory contributes a micro-level lens that makes participants' strategic (in)visibility legible as communicative competence under constraint. Rather than interpreting selective disclosure as contradiction or lack of authenticity, I read it as relational identity work shaped by audience, context, and perceived risk. This framing is particularly important in small-city contexts where social information circulates quickly and where students must manage multiple overlapping publics: classmates, staff, co-nationals, queer peers, and families across borders.

I extend identity management theory by situating it in a transnational and small-city ecology. In participants' accounts, identity management was not only interpersonal; it was also digital (curating social media audiences) and bureaucratic (navigating names and gender markers on institutional forms). It was future-oriented, shaped by the possibility of return and by immigration uncertainty. In this way, I position identity management not merely as a set of "communication strategies" but as a survival practice that links the micro-politics of everyday interaction to the macro conditions of migration and place.

6.3.3 Neoliberalism: Explaining Why Inclusion Becomes Individualised Work

Neoliberalism provides the structural lens for understanding why inclusion is frequently experienced as symbolic, inconsistent, and privatized. The literature review documented how internationalisation has become entangled with market logics and how institutions may emphasise diversity and inclusion while relying on international students as revenue streams. Within this political economy, "inclusive campus" narratives can function as reputational assets even when support infrastructures remain thin, discretionary, or culturally narrow.

In participants' narratives, the neoliberal context became visible as responsibilisation. Students repeatedly described having to self-manage risk, navigate inconsistent staff competence, interpret whether reporting would lead to accountability, and sustain wellbeing under uncertainty. Neoliberalism, in this dissertation, is therefore not a background ideology; it is a way to make sense of why the labour of belonging is downloaded onto those who are most vulnerable to its costs. By bringing neoliberalism into conversation with intersectionality and identity management theory, I offer a multi-scalar explanation of the central paradox. Rights and inclusion may be visible, yet the everyday conditions of liveability remain contingent because structural supports are unevenly resourced and unevenly enacted.

6.3.4 An Integrative Conceptual Contribution: Queer Safety as an Infrastructural Achievement

A key conceptual contribution of this research is the reframing of "queer safety" away from being a national attribute and toward being an infrastructural achievement: something produced through local ecologies of services, spaces, relationships, and institutional response. Participants' narratives show that legal protections matter, but they do not eliminate the everyday conditions that shape exposure and belonging. Instead, safety is assembled through practical

infrastructures. Whether queer spaces are culturally usable; whether counselling and healthcare are competent and accessible; whether anti-racist practice is embedded rather than assumed; whether confidentiality is protected in a small city; and whether institutions respond predictably when harm occurs.

Such a reframing has implications beyond small-city Ontario. It suggests that researchers and institutions should be cautious about relying on national reputations of inclusion as evidence of lived equity. It also suggests that any serious commitment to queer inclusion in international education must be evaluated in place-specific terms: what infrastructures exist, who can access them, and at what cost of visibility and emotional labour.

6.4 Methodological Contributions and Ethical Learnings

Methodologically, my research contributes to qualitative research on queer migration and international education by demonstrating the value of thematic narrative analysis for making temporality and place analytically central. Much research on international students and queer students tends to treat “experience” as a set of factors (e.g., stress, adjustment, discrimination). By contrast, the thematic narrative approach used here highlights how participants actively make sense of their lives through stories with arcs. Stories that begin with migration imaginaries, move through arrival and recalibration, and continue as ongoing life-making under shifting conditions. This approach made visible how the meaning of “Canada” changes over time and how belonging is continuously negotiated rather than achieved.

Ethically, the dissertation underscores that confidentiality is not a procedural detail in small-city research with marginalised communities; it is a methodological condition. In small Ontario cities, details can be identifying even when names are changed. Protecting participants required minimizing uniquely identifying information while preserving analytic integrity. This

ethical stance aligns with the dissertation's substantive argument that small-city recognizability shapes risk and that research practice must take that recognizability seriously rather than assuming anonymity is automatically achievable.

Finally, the research process offers a methodological lesson about co-construction. Participants' narratives were not simply "collected"; they were produced in a particular relational context, shaped by trust, shared positionality, and the risks participants navigate in their everyday lives. For queer international students who routinely manage disclosure, interviews are not neutral spaces; they are also sites of identity management. Recognizing this co-construction strengthens, rather than undermines, the findings It shows that strategic (in)visibility is not merely a theme in the data but also an interpretive lens through which participants approached the very act of participating in research.

6.5 Practical Contributions: What Changes When We Take These Findings Seriously

I identified implications in Chapter 5, but the conclusion chapter is the space to restate the practical significance in a consolidated way and to clarify what kinds of change the findings demand.

First, the study suggests that the primary institutional task is to close the gap between symbolic inclusion and materially usable support. Pride flags, EDI statements, and celebratory events matter, but they are insufficient when students' everyday experiences are shaped by microaggressions, racialised exclusion, and inconsistent response. Usable inclusion requires infrastructures that reduce the need for students to constantly self-manage risk.

Second, the findings highlight that small-city campuses must design supports with recognizability in mind. In small cities, entering a queer space or seeking a specific service can function as unwanted disclosure. Privacy-by-default access pathways, confidential appointment

options, and online supports are not conveniences; they are necessary design features for enabling students to access care without trading safety for support.

Third, my analysis emphasises that queer inclusion must be explicitly anti-racist and intersectional. If queer spaces remain socially organised around whiteness, racialised queer international students will continue to face fractured belonging. This calls for culturally usable programming, facilitation norms that can hold “heavier” migration narratives, and institutional accountability when racism occurs within queer-designated spaces.

Fourth, I identified immigration uncertainty as a wellbeing issue and, specifically, as a queer issue. Status precarity shapes disclosure decisions, transnational tethering, and future planning. While institutions cannot control federal immigration policy, they can reduce uncertainty’s harm by offering accurate advising, integrating immigration support with queer-affirming and anti-racist services, and communicating policy changes proactively rather than leaving students to navigate risk through informal networks.

In short, the practical contribution of this research is not simply that “more supports are needed.” It is that supports must be designed and resourced in ways that recognise the specific ecology of small cities and the intersectional conditions through which queer international students live: high visibility, thin infrastructure, racialised power, and transnational and policy uncertainty.

6.6 Limitations and the Boundary of Claims

It is also important to clarify the boundary conditions of what this dissertation can claim. This study is grounded in 14 interviews with queer international students in small Ontario cities and produces interpretive, analytic insights rather than generalizable population claims. Its

strength lies in depth and in the ability to illuminate processes and tensions that are often obscured in broader surveys or in research concentrated in large metropolitan centres.

At the same time, the focus on small Ontario cities means that experiences may differ in large urban centres, in other provinces with different higher education and policy contexts, or in institutions with different service infrastructures. Additionally, as with many qualitative studies, voluntary participation may mean that certain experiences are less visible, particularly those of students who are highly closeted, those who perceive research participation as too risky, or those with limited connection to campus/community networks through which recruitment often occurs. Finally, interview narratives capture meaning-making and lived interpretation; they do not directly observe institutional practices or adjudicate across institutional and student perspectives. These limitations do not weaken the findings; they clarify the scope in which the findings should be understood and where further inquiry is needed.

6.7 Future Directions: What This Research Opens Up

My research points toward several areas of future inquiry. Comparative studies across city sizes and across institutional contexts would help clarify what is specific to small-city ecologies and what reflects broader patterns of neoliberal internationalisation and racialised inclusion. Longitudinal research is also needed to follow queer international students across the life course of international education: from pre-arrival imaginaries to arrival, adjustment, graduation, and post-graduation status transitions. Such work would deepen understanding of how disclosure strategies, belonging, and wellbeing change over time, especially as immigration pathways shift and as students move closer to the “pinch points” where uncertainty intensifies.

Methodologically, future work could benefit from expanding beyond interviews to methods that capture everyday life in situ: diaries, experience sampling, participatory mapping,

walking interviews, and ethnographic engagement in queer spaces and service settings. These approaches could make the spatial and affective labour of strategic (in)visibility even more visible and could illuminate how whiteness and "Canadianised" norms operate interactionally within spaces that are nominally inclusive.

Finally, this dissertation suggests a particularly urgent research agenda on the relationship between neoliberal international education and queer liveability. If inclusion increasingly functions as reputational branding, and if international students are treated as economic assets while absorbing disproportionate risk, then research is needed that directly investigates how institutional strategies, recruitment narratives, funding models, and policy volatility shape the material conditions of queer students' lives. This is not only an academic question. It is a question of ethical responsibility in a sector that depends heavily on international student participation while often leaving students to manage insecurity individually.

6.8 From Suffering to Purpose: Closing Reflections as a Queer International Student Researcher

In the opening chapter, I located my scholarly journey in bell hooks' assertion that theory can be a location for healing, an attempt to understand pain and, through understanding, transform one's relationship to it. My research is an enactment of that claim. It has also been a reminder that healing is not only personal but collective and infrastructural. Queer international students' struggles are not reducible to individual resilience or adaptation; they are shaped by systems, by migration regimes, by institutional governance, by racial hierarchies, by small-city infrastructures, and by the persistent cultural and familial tethers that cross borders.

Completing this research has therefore clarified something I did not fully know at the outset: that researching queer international student life is not simply about documenting harm or

celebrating resilience. It is about making visible the *conditions* under which harm becomes ordinary and resilience becomes required. It is also about refusing the quiet normalisation of these conditions, refusing the idea that it is natural for students to live with constant calculation, or that it is acceptable for inclusion to be rhetorical while safety remains contingent. The narratives participants shared are not only stories of struggle. They are accounts of agency, strategy, care, and future-making: ways of building liveable lives in environments that do not always make liveability easy.

There is a temptation, in conclusion chapters, to offer closure. Yet the central insight of this dissertation is that queer international student life in small Ontario cities is defined less by closure than by ongoing negotiation. The "work of becoming" that I described in Chapter 1 is not completed by arrival. It continues in the classroom, in the workplace, in the pride centre, in the body, on the phone with family, in the choice to post or not post, and in the future-oriented calculations shaped by immigration uncertainty. My dissertation does not end that work. It contributes to it by providing language, analysis, and evidence that can support more accountable institutions and more culturally usable infrastructures of belonging.

6.9 Final Statement

I have argued that queer international students in small Ontario cities live at the intersection of possibility and constraint. They arrive with imaginaries of Canada as a refuge, yet they live Canada through place-specific infrastructures that make safety conditional; they negotiate belonging through strategic (in)visibility across multiple audiences and settings; and they confront the structuring force of whiteness across both mainstream and queer spaces, producing fractured belonging and uneven access to support. In doing so, they reveal a central

paradox: inclusion may be visible, yet liveability remains contingent when structural supports are thin, inconsistent, or culturally narrow.

If there is one message to carry forward, it is this: queer inclusion for international students cannot be measured primarily by the presence of rights, policies, or branding. It must be assessed by the everyday usability of support and the uneven costs of visibility, costs shaped by place, race, and status precarity. Building more inclusive futures therefore requires more than celebration. It requires infrastructure, accountability, and sustained commitment to making belonging not something students must continuously earn through self-management, but something institutions and communities actively produce through material support, cultural competence, and justice-oriented practice.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Material

Email to Institutions/Pride Spaces

Subject: Call for Participants: Research Study on Experiences of Queer International Students in Small Ontario Cities

Dear [Name of Pride/2SLGBTQ+ Center],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Mohit Dudeja], and I am a PhD student at Lakehead University, conducting a research study as part of my PhD program. I am reaching out to request your support in advertising a call for participants for my research study through your center and, if possible, in your newsletters or social media platforms.

About the Study

This research focuses on understanding the lived experiences of queer international students navigating postsecondary education in small Ontario cities. Through this study, I aim to explore how queer identity intersects with educational experiences, institutional supports, and the sense of belonging in these unique contexts.

Participant Criteria

I am looking to speak with individuals who meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as LGBTQ+.
2. Are international students currently enrolled in a postsecondary institution.
3. Reside and study in a small Ontario city (population of less than 150,000 people).

What Participation Involves

Participants will take part in a **semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60 minutes**, with the possibility of a brief 30-minute follow-up session if needed. Interviews can be

conducted in person or virtually, depending on the participant's preference. To ensure privacy, all data will be anonymised, and participants will have the right to withdraw at any point.

How to Get Involved

Interested individuals can contact me at mdudeja@lakeheadu.ca to learn more or schedule an interview. Alternatively, they can scan the QR code or follow the link provided on the attached flyer to complete a short eligibility form.

Your center's support in sharing this call for participants would greatly contribute to amplifying the voices of queer international students and addressing gaps in research on this topic. Please let me know if you would be open to displaying the flyer in your space or including the details in your newsletters or digital communications.

Thank you for your time and support. Should you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

Warm regards,

Mohit Dudeja

PhD Student, Lakehead University

+1 905 341 7567

Eligibility Form for Research Participation

https://forms.gle/Bx7B4AUHCeUKHN9cA

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study on the lived experiences of queer international students in small Ontario cities. Please answer the following questions to determine your eligibility.

1. **Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ or 2SLGBTQ+ community?**
    - Yes

- No

2. **Would you like to share how you identify yourself? (Optional)**

   ____

3. **Are you currently enrolled as an international student in a postsecondary institution in Canada?**
   - Yes
   - No
4. **Which city in Canada is your current institution located in?**

   (Please type the name of the city)

   ____

5. **What is your current academic status?**
   - Undergraduate student
   - Graduate student (Master's or PhD)
   - Other (please specify): ___________
6. **Are you comfortable participating in an hour interview (virtual or in-person) about your experiences as a queer international student?**
   - Yes
   - No
7. **Do you consent to being contacted for a potential follow-up session lasting half an hour, if necessary?**
   - Yes
   - No

8. **Do you require any accommodations to participate in the interview?** *(e.g., accessibility needs, language support, etc.)*
    - ○ No
    - ○ Yes (please specify): ___________
9. **Preferred interview format:**
    - ○ Virtual (Zoom or other secure platform)
    - ○ In-person (if you are located near the researcher)
    - ○ No preference
10. **Contact Information** *(Please provide your email address or phone number so we can follow up with you.)*

- Name (optional): ___________
- Email: ___________
- Phone number (optional): ___________

11. **Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study?** *(Optional: Provide any questions or concerns here, and the researcher will respond to you.)*

Social Media Advertisement

🌟 Call for Participants: Research Study on Queer International Students in Small Ontario Cities 🌟

Are you an international student who identifies as LGBTQ+ and studies in a small Ontario city? Or do you know someone who fits this description? I am conducting a research study to explore

the lived experiences of queer international students navigating education, identity, and belonging in small city contexts.

Who Can Participate?

🔷 Identify as queer or LGBTQ+

🔷 Currently an international student

🔷 Enrolled in a college/university in a small Ontario city

What Does Participation Involve?

🗨 A 60-minute semi-structured interview (virtual or in-person)

🗨 Option for a short 30-minute follow-up session, if required

🗨 Full confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time

Your stories are valuable and will contribute to shedding light on the unique challenges and supports experienced by queer international students in Canada.

📩 If you're interested or would like to know more, please reach out to me at [mdudeja@lakeheadu.ca] or click the link here [https://forms.gle/mkFY9BS1YNTnPhg66] to learn more and sign up!

Please feel free to share this post with your networks or tag someone who might be interested. Your support in amplifying this call is greatly appreciated!

#ResearchStudy #QueerStudents #LGBTQ #InternationalStudents #SmallCitiesCanada #HigherEducation

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. As shared in the information letter, the purpose of this conversation is to understand your experiences as a queer international student in a small Ontario city (I would use the name of the city), focusing on how your identity has shaped your educational journey and daily life. Your insights will help shed light on the supports, barriers, and factors impacting the well-being and sense of belonging of queer international students.

This interview is designed to be a conversation. While I have prepared some guiding questions, you are welcome to share any additional thoughts, stories, or reflections you feel are relevant. Your identity and responses will remain confidential, and you can choose to skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

Warm-Up Questions (Building Rapport):

Can you start by sharing a little about yourself? (e.g., your background, field of study, and interests)

Follow up questions if not included in response to the previous question:

When did you move to Canada?

Is this your first time in Canada?

Is this your first time living abroad?

Did you have any family members living in Canada before you came here for study?

How would you describe your journey to Canada as an international student?

How did you come to study in a small Ontario city?

Follow up:

Why Canada of all places?

Main Interview Questions:

Section 1: Queer Identity and Daily Life

How would you describe your queer identity, and how has it evolved over time?

What does being queer mean to you in the context of living in Canada?

How does your queer identity influence your daily experiences in this city (e.g., social interactions, community spaces)?

Section 2: Educational Experiences

Were you out to your family and friends in your home country?

Are you out in Canada with your friends and colleagues?

How has your queer identity shaped your experiences within your academic program?

What sorts of supports have you found specific to being a queer international student at your institution?/What resources or initiatives on campus (if any) have been helpful in supporting your identity and educational journey?

Follow up if needed:

Are you aware of any queer spaces or initiatives on campus that you know of yet have never visited or explored?

If yes, why have you not visited them?

What sorts of challenges have you encountered as a queer international student at your institution?

Can you describe any interactions you’ve had with faculty, staff, or peers that were particularly affirming?

Can you describe any interactions you've had with faculty, staff, or peers that were particularly difficult?

Section 3: Sense of Belonging and Well-Being

How do you navigate spaces (both academic and social) where queerness may not be visible or accepted?

How do you manage the tension between privacy and visibility as a queer person?

What factors have contributed to your sense of belonging or alienation within the campus and broader community?

How have your experiences as a queer international student impacted your emotional well-being or mental health?

Section 4: Intersectionality and Broader Themes

How do other aspects of your identity (e.g., nationality, culture, gender, race) intersect with your queer identity?

What cultural or societal expectations from your home country continue to influence your experience in Canada?

In what ways do you think small cities differ from larger cities in providing support for queer international students? Do you have any experience in large Canadian cities?

Section 5: Coping, Resilience, and Future Perspectives

Can you share some strategies or practices that have helped you cope with challenges as a queer international student?

What role do you see for educational institutions in creating a more inclusive environment for queer international students?

Looking ahead, how do you envision the future for queer international students in small Ontario cities?

Closing Questions:

Is there anything we haven't discussed that you feel is important to share?

How was this experience of reflecting on and sharing your story?

Conclusion:

Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights. Your story is incredibly valuable for this research, and I deeply appreciate your time and openness. If you have any additional thoughts later, feel free to reach out. I'll also follow up with you for a transcript review to ensure your voice is accurately represented.

Notes to self:

I will be flexible: Allowing participants to elaborate and diverge from the structured questions when appropriate.

Use probing questions when necessary, such as:

"Can you give an example of that?"

"How did that make you feel?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Be mindful of sensitivities: Acknowledge the vulnerability involved in sharing personal and potentially painful experiences.

Record and take field notes: Capture key points, recurring themes, and contextual details to inform coding and analysis.

This protocol is aligned with my transformative and constructivist worldview, allowing participants to share narratives while ensuring that their voices are centered in the research question.

Appendix C: Participant Information Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Mohit Dudeja, and I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. I am conducting a study titled *Transglobal Queer Identities* to explore the experiences of queer international students in small Ontario cities, and I am inviting you to participate in this study.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Before deciding, please read this letter carefully to understand what is involved. If you have any questions after reading, do not hesitate to reach out to me for clarification.

Purpose

Academic research on international students has primarily focused on the experiences of cisgender heterosexual individuals (i.e., straight men and women) and has largely been limited to large urban centers. This study seeks to understand how LGBTQ+ international students experience their lives, particularly their postsecondary education experiences, in small Ontario cities.

What Information Will Be Collected?

I will conduct one-on-one interviews with self-identifying queer international students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in Canadian cities with populations under 150,000 people. During the interviews, I will ask questions about:

- Personal details such as your age and nationality.
- Your expectations before moving to Canada.
- Your challenges and experiences in Canada, both within and outside your university/college.

- The support systems available to you.

What Is Requested of You as a Participant?

We will arrange a convenient time to meet for an interview in a quiet, private place of your choice, or online via Zoom if in-person meetings are not possible. The interview will take approximately an hour. I also may ask to meet you for a half an hour follow-up session a week or two after the interview if I need clarification or additional information.

During the interview, I will ask questions about your experiences as a queer international student in a small Ontario city. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. I may also take notes during the interview.

Once the transcription is complete, you will have an opportunity to review it to confirm its accuracy. You may request changes to the transcript if needed.

Your Rights as a Participant

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

- Your participation (or decision not to participate) will not affect my academic standing.
- You have the right to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.
- Safeguards will be in place to ensure the security of the data you provide.
- I will inform you of any information that may affect your decision to continue participation.

What Are the Risks and Benefits?

Risks:

There is no foreseeable harm or risk greater than what you might encounter in everyday life. However, given the sensitive nature of the topic, certain interview questions might evoke emotions or painful memories. To address this:

- I will provide you with a list of queer-affirmative mental health resources and general crisis helplines before the interview.
- You have the right to pause or withdraw from the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Benefits:

You may find the opportunity to share and critically reflect on your experiences personally rewarding. Additionally, if you wish, you can request a copy of the research summary or my full dissertation to learn more about the experiences of other queer international students.

How Will My Confidentiality Be Maintained?

To protect your privacy:

- All data will remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity.
- You will have the option to choose your own pseudonym.
- Only my supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton, and I will have access to the raw data. The transcripts will be anonymised and securely stored on an encrypted hard drive in the Lakehead University's storage for seven years.

What Will My Data Be Used For?

The findings from this research will be used for my PhD dissertation, academic presentations, and publications. You will not be identified in any of these outputs.

Where Will My Data Be Stored?

All transcripts and field notes will be securely stored on an external hard drive. The data will be kept in the Faculty of Education's secure storage area in the Bora Laskin building on the Thunder Bay campus of Lakehead University for seven years, after which it will be securely destroyed, in accordance with university policy.

How Can I Receive a Copy of the Research Results?

If you would like to receive a summary of the research findings or an electronic copy of the full dissertation, please indicate this on the consent form, and I will email it to you.

What If I Want to Withdraw from the Study?

You may withdraw at any point before approving the final interview transcript. If you choose to withdraw, please contact me (contact details below). You will not be able to withdraw after the final interview transcript is approved.

Researcher Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at:

- **Email:** mdudeja@lakeheadu.ca
- **Phone:** 905-341-7567

You may also contact my supervisor:

- **Dr. Gerald Walton**
- **Email:** gwalton@lakeheadu.ca

Research Ethics Board Review and Approval

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns or questions, you can contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at:

- **Phone:** 807-343-8283
- **Email:** research@lakeheadu.ca

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Mohit Dudeja

PhD Student

Faculty of Education, Lakehead University

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to participate in the research study titled *Transglobal Queer Identities,* conducted by Mohit Dudeja, PhD student, Faculty of Education, Lakehead University. This form outlines your rights and responsibilities as a participant and ensures that you have been fully informed about the study.

MY CONSENT

I agree to the following:

- I have read and understand the information contained in the Participant Information Letter.
- I agree to participate in the study.
- I understand the risks and benefits of participating in the study.
- I understand that I am a volunteer and can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and I may choose not to answer any question.
- I understand that my data will be securely stored in the Faculty of Education's secure storage area in Thunder Bay for a minimum period of 7 years following the completion of the research project.
- I understand that the research findings will be made available to me upon request.
- I understand that I will remain anonymous, and my confidentiality will be maintained.
- All of my questions regarding the study have been answered.

By consenting to participate, I confirm that I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

CONSENT TO AUDIO-RECORDING

I consent to audio-recording of the interview:

- Yes
- No

REQUEST FOR RESEARCH FINDINGS

Please provide your contact email if you would like to receive:

1. The research summary:

- Yes
- No

2. The full dissertation:

- Yes
- No

Email Address: ____

Participant Information:

Name (Printed): ____

Signature: ____

Date: ____

Researcher Contact Information

For further information or clarification about this study, you may contact:

Mohit Dudeja, PhD Student

Faculty of Education, Lakehead University

Phone: 905-341-7567

Email: mdudeja@lakeheadu.ca

Or

Dr. Gerald Walton, Professor

Faculty of Education, Lakehead University

Email: gwalton@lakeheadu.ca

Research Ethics Board Approval

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or concerns about the ethics of this research, please contact:

Sue Wright

Lakehead University Research Ethics Board

Phone: 807-343-8283

Email: research@lakeheadu.ca

Please sign and return this form by email to the researcher, Mohit Dudeja. A copy of this consent form will also be provided to you.