

## **FAMILY DYNAMICS IN A CONSERVATIVE CONTEXT AND THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LGBTQ+ TEENAGERS AND PARENTS IN PAKISTAN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Having strong connections with family can help LGBTQ+ teenagers, but not many studies have been conducted on this subject in Pakistani Muslim families, where being LGBTQ+ is often not accepted. We discussed with 12 Pakistani Muslim LGBTQ+ teenagers about how they maintain their family relationships since their identities are not supported. We found that these teenagers avoid talking about their sexual orientation directly to avoid rejection. Instead, they talk openly about other topics, work on making their family relationships stronger with patience, and pick ways of communicating that are less likely to start conflicts. Some of the major issues they face are feeling distant from family members, finding it hard to talk about LGBTQ+ issues and religion, and feeling like they are not being true to themselves because they have to hide who they really are. Even though all family relationships have some problems, certain issues come from cultural and religious refusal to accept being LGBTQ+. However, the study showed that Pakistani LGBTQ+ teenagers are finding creative ways to stay connected to their families despite the challenges. This gives us a unique perspective on how they build relationships in cultures that do not accept LGBTQ+ identities.*

**Keywords:** Islam, Family relations, LGBTQ+ youth, Sexual orientation, Sexual identities

**JEL classification:** J13, J15, J16

## **1. Introduction**

Teenagers who are part of minority sexual and gender identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+), face specific challenges related to their identities. In addition to the typical developmental stressors all adolescents experience, LGBTQ+ teenagers also encounter unique stressors, often referred to as minority stressors, that their heterosexual and cisgender peers do not face (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017). These can include external factors like discrimination and social exclusion (distal stressors) as well as internal struggles like concealing one's identity (proximal stressors). Minority stress has been consistently linked to mental health disparities affecting the LGBTQ+ population (Schmitz et al., 2020).

LGBTQ+ youth from conservative religious backgrounds (Ogbonna, 2023) may experience added (Block, 2021) strains due to non-affirmation of their identities based on traditional gender norms and beliefs about homosexuality (Lehmiller, Law, & Tormala, 2010). When families uphold heterosexist religious values, LGBTQ+ adolescents contend with additional proximal stressors like internalized stigma, shame, and rejection fears (Goffnett, 2020). Despite these challenges, some prioritize maintaining family ties and faith communities over full outness (Nakhid et al., 2022).

Supportive family relationships can buffer the negative impacts of minority stress for LGBTQ+ teenagers (Bruce, Harper, & Bauermeister, 2015). However, those from conservative religious backgrounds are least likely to receive parental acceptance due to conflicts between their identities and family beliefs (Ghosh, 2020). While research explores LGBTQ+ youth in religious contexts, few studies directly examine their relationships with parents when identities diverge from family values (Newcomb et al., 2019). Exploring how LGBTQ+ teenagers continue to have strong relationships with their parents, even when faced with rejection, is important for their physical and mental health. For that reason, we attempted to know what helps keep these connections strong among LGBTQ+ Muslim teenagers in Pakistan, a country where being LGBTQ+ is not accepted by society or law.

### **1.1 LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, high school, and college**

In middle and high schools, as well as colleges, LGBTQ+ students often find it hard to fit in. Schools should be places where everyone can learn and grow, but sometimes, the usual way people think about boys and girls can make LGBTQ+ students feel left out. Teachers and people in charge do not always know how to help, and sometimes they let mean behaviour 'slide'. One of the biggest problems LGBTQ+ students face is feeling like they must hide who they really are. In interviews we had, almost every LGBTQ+ student shared worries about telling their families. They were scared they might be pushed away, forced to leave home, or make their families feel embarrassed. This leads to a profoundly repressive existence — one student described it as "having to put on an act every single day" to maintain the façade of being a happy, straight, cisgender teenager adhering to society's norms. The mental and emotional strain of this perpetual self-censorship takes an immense toll. LGBTQ+ students spoke of crippling anxiety, depression, low self-worth, and suicidal ideation stemming from their inability to embrace their authentic identities. As one youth put it, "It's like being smothered ... you can never really breathe because you're always watching what you say and do."

And yet, despite the difficulties, very few LGBTQ+ students are willing to risk overtly coming out to their parents. The family unit is simply too sacred in Pakistani/Muslim culture to imperil over one's sexual orientation or gender identity. Across the interviews, a common refrain emerged: "I love my parents, and they love me. I don't want to lose that love by destroying everything with the truth." So, LGBTQ+ youth become experts at carefully editing themselves, picking and choosing which parts of their identity to express or conceal depending on the situation. With friends, they may be able to let their guard down slightly. But with family, a facade must be maintained — affecting a persona of the perfect, pious, heteronormative Muslim son or daughter that parents yearn for. This shape-shifting existence fosters an intense duality and inauthenticity that eats away at the LGBTQ+ student's sense of self over time. As one put it: "There are two me – the one I actually am, and the one I pretend to be at home and at school. I'm getting to where I can't really remember which is the real me anymore."

Rather than sever family ties entirely through radical truth-telling, LGBTQ+ youth develop alternative communication strategies aimed at

preserving relationships while still allowing fragments of their true identity to emerge. With parents, they avoid discussions of romance/sexuality entirely, pivoting conversations to shared interests, academic goals, or other common grounds where they can relate authentically without tension. They become adept at reading situations and code-switching their personalities to alleviate parental suspicions. Small, plausibly deniable acts of gender-nonconformity get strategically expressed, pushing boundaries in mild ways that are unlikely to provoke outright conflict. They cultivate patience, putting on an innocent teen act around parents while awaiting the day they can live more openly.

For LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth, the school experience is one of profound alienation, emotional turmoil, and the constant rending of one's identity into publicly-acceptable and private self-expressions. And yet their capacity for resilience is remarkable. By developing nuanced relational skills and carefully modulating their self-censorship, they find ways to maintain family ties despite lack of acceptance. It is an untenable solution, but one that stems from the deep primacy of family in Pakistani/Muslim culture over radically individualistic expressions of identity.

The LGBTQ+ students' lives are defined by the personal/cultural fault lines they straddle. Until broader social changes occur, their stories reflect an aching need to have their identities fully affirmed while being unable to abide the prospect of familial rejection. They walk a tightrope daily, and their striving persists in the hopes of one day achieving authenticity and unconditional love in the same life.

## **1.2 Stress and conflict among Muslim LGBTQ+ teenagers and parents**

The already tumultuous period of adolescence, rife with changing emotions and patterns of increased parent-child conflict, takes on heightened complexity for Muslim LGBTQ+ youth. While all teenagers negotiate evolving boundaries and renegotiations of parental authority as part of normative development, LGBTQ+ Pakistani teenagers face compounded layers of minority stress that fundamentally strain these familial relationships. For many, the profound need to conceal their LGBTQ+ identities from parents and extended family is all-consuming. There is a pervasive fear that any hint of being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender would bring utter

shame and rejection upon the entire family unit. One youth expressed it as "living a double life...smiling at home and pretending everything is fine while carrying this huge secret always." This constant self-editing and repression is mentally and emotionally exhausting.

The conflict within these teenagers is immense — their conservative religious/cultural upbringing has instilled core values around filial piety, devotion to family, and pursuing a traditional normative life path. And yet their innermost selves are fundamentally at odds with parental expectations. As one described it: "I am a good Muslim son who honours his parents. Except for this huge part of me, I must hide from them because they could never accept it."

This dissonance breeds profound shame, depression, anxiety, and hopelessness. Self-worth becomes eroded by years of harbouring what youths described as their "true, unforgivable selves" locked away. Suicidal ideation, though never acted upon, emerged as a common coping mechanism for some — a way to escape the psychic pain of concealment. LGBTQ+ Muslim teenagers internalize potent messages that their desires are deviant, sinful, and disappointing to their families. Without countervailing affirmation, it is unsurprising that mental health issues proliferate. However, despite the profound strain on parent-child bonds, very few LGBTQ+ youths are willing to completely sever ties. The emphasis on family unity and devotion to parents is too deeply instilled. What emerges are intricate strategies aimed at preserving relationships despite the schism in self-acceptance. Youth develop almost CIA-level skills in compartmentalization — code-switching between identities, carefully censoring any discussion of sexuality/romance with parents, and becoming masterful readers of emotional atmospheres to avoid provocation. They learn to build warmth around shared interests, inside jokes, and personal pursuits that have nothing to do with LGBTQ+ identity. The self is fragmented — one persona for parents, another for peers where they can be more authentic.

Over time, this precarious balancing act between true self and family-approved self takes a toll. Youths describe feeling fundamentally inauthentic, disconnected from their own emotions and identities. The fear is that their parents' love relies on them maintaining an approved facade of son/daughterhood. Any slip could shatter family ties forever. And yet,

isolation is not a viable option for these teenagers. Family is the bedrock of their existence; to sacrifice those bonds is to hollow out their sense of self, culture and spiritual moorings even more profoundly. So they persevere, nurturing connections in the bespoke ways available to them, and clinging to the hope that full acceptance may still emerge one day.

The tightrope they walk is formidable. On one side lies the soul-subsuming abnegation of self required to uphold family roles, on the other is the terrifying plunge into permanent rupture and solitude. Muslim LGBTQ+ youth learn to make peace with this precarious in-between — honouring their identities in whatever slivers are possible while relentlessly preserving familial love. Their resilience is remarkable, but it exacts a psychological toll that no adolescent should have to bear.

## **2. Focus of the Study**

This study takes an intimate look at the precarious relational tightrope walked by LGBTQ+ Muslim teenagers in Pakistan. For these youth, the bonds of family and cultural belonging are sacred, yet they exist in fundamental tension with the core truths of their sexual and gender identities. Pakistani society and traditional Islamic teachings largely condemn homosexuality and gender non-conformity, creating an environment where LGBTQ+ teenagers face immense pressures to remain closeted. The psychological toll is staggering as they conceal integral parts of their selfhood, donning façades of heteronormativity to avoid rejection, backlash, and the shattering of familial ties. Beset by fear, shame, and internalized stigma, many teenagers develop intricately coded ways of relating to parents; nurturing warmth around shared interests while never unlocking discussions of their authentic desires and personhood. Though some semblance of connection is preserved, the disconnection from one's fullest identity extracts a heavy psychic cost. This study elevates the voices of these LGBTQ+ Muslim youth, uncovering their thoughtful, agonizing strategies of self-editing and duality aimed at safeguarding parents' love without sacrificing selfhood entirely. Their resilience is remarkable, but also laced with profound inauthenticity as they tread the fault lines between familial piety and untapped explorations of identity.

### **3. Research Methodology**

When we started looking into LGBTQ+ identities and how they fit into family life in communities that practice Islam closely, we made sure to put together a group of researchers who knew how to handle such a delicate subject with respect, strong ethical standards, and understanding from various viewpoints. Our three-member team was carefully chosen to reflect a broad mix of genders, sexual orientations, religious beliefs, and life stories. Among the research team, we had two Pakistani Muslims who are straight and identify with their birth gender. One of these researchers has done a lot of interviews and studies in less wealthy parts of Pakistan. The other one specializes in understanding Islamic teachings and offers support to LGBTQ+ Muslim young people. At each stage, from designing the interview protocols to coding and analysis, all three researchers were actively involved. This allowed for extensive dialogue unpacking assumptions, reflexive consideration of our own identities/lenses, and rigorous scrutiny of interpretations. For example, when conducting interviews, some researchers could use shared cultural references to build rapport, while the other researchers provided an "outsider" counterpoint to question norms.

Data analysis involved an iterative process of independent coding by each researcher, followed by team meetings to negotiate consensus on themes until saturation was reached. We consciously balanced etic and emic perspectives – the gay researchers oriented us towards indigenous meanings around concepts like family honour, while the other ensured fidelity to psychological constructs like minority stress. Our grounding in the APA's guidelines for LGBTQ+-affirmative practice and the AMAN Bedari Islamic values aided in maintaining an ethical, strengths-based approach throughout. The diversity within the team, coupled with a spirit of humble openness, allowed us to honour the lived realities of LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth in authentic, nuanced ways. No research is ever fully unbiased. However, we attempted to create a dialectic of perspectives and critically scrutinized our own assumptions at every turn. The trust, rapport, and resilient spirits shared by the LGBTQ+ youth participants further enriched our understanding and deepened our appreciation for their journeys. We hope this methodology engendered findings that elevate their voices with utmost dignity and thoughtfulness.

#### **4. Procedures and Participants**

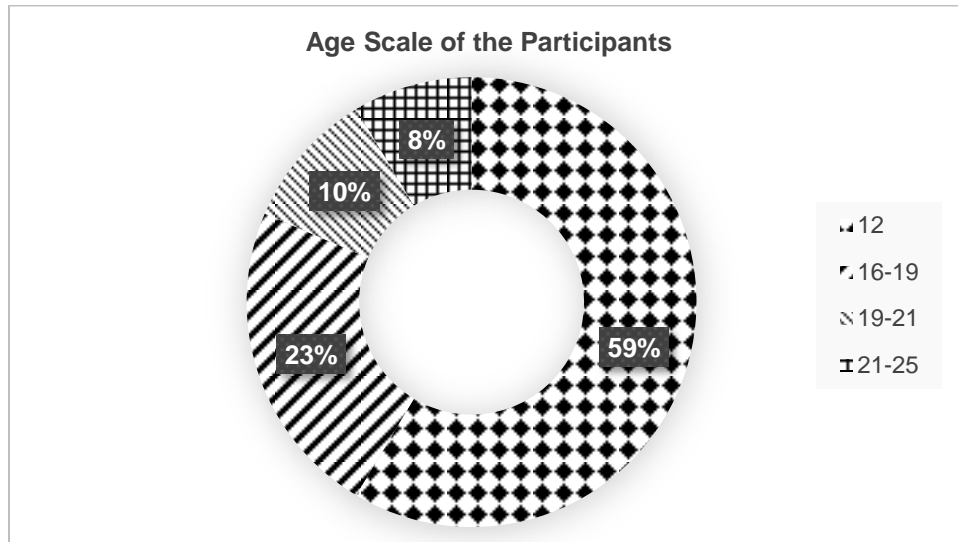
For this study, we sought to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslim youth in Pakistan and their relationships with parents from the perspective of both teenagers and parents themselves. Recruitment occurred from March 2023 to November 2023, utilizing contacts at LGBTQ+ youth organizations, social media outreach, and snowball sampling from initial participants. Eligibility criteria required the youth to be between ages 13-25, self-identify as LGBTQ+, be of Pakistani Muslim background, and currently residing with at least one parent. Parents had to have a child meeting these criteria.

From an initial pool of 37 prospective youth participants, 12 LGBTQ+ Pakistani Muslim teenagers were selected along with 12 of their parents (10 mothers and 2 fathers) to take part in in-depth qualitative interviews. This smaller sample allowed us to engage in a deep exploratory study of their lived experiences. The youth self-identified across a range of sexual orientations including gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and questioning. Some identified as transgender or non-binary in addition to their sexual orientation. They represented various socioeconomic backgrounds, from lower-income to upper-middle class families.

Interviews were conducted separately and confidentially; first with the LGBTQ+ youth, and subsequently with one parent. We made clear that parents would not be informed of their child's LGBTQ+ identity by us. The semi-structured interviews averaged 60-90 minutes, facilitated by the Pakistani researchers in Urdu/English to allow for cultural familiarity and fluent dialogue. They explored family religious/cultural values, parent-child relationships, minority stressors faced by LGBTQ+ youth, strategies for navigating identity tensions, and resiliency factors.

Youth received a modest monetary compensation while parents received a non-monetary gift as thanks for their participation. All data were de-identified and securely stored. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated as needed, and analysed by our full research team using an iterative coding process until thematic saturation was reached. Through this rigorous methodology centring the voices of LGBTQ+ Pakistani Muslim youth and parents themselves, we were able to deeply engage their experiences in sustaining familial bonds while navigating pivotal identity tensions.





## 5. Insights from Available Literature

The relationships between LGBTQ+ youth and their parents have been widely studied, with research consistently highlighting the importance of family support and acceptance in promoting positive youth development and wellbeing (Snapp et al., 2015). Strong familial bonds act as a protective factor, buffering LGBTQ+ adolescents from the adverse mental health impacts often associated with minority stress (Gilbert et al., 2024). Conversely, youth who experience high levels of parental rejection are at increased risk for depression, substance abuse, and suicide attempts (Ryan et al., 2009).

However, the existing literature is notably lacking in perspectives from non-Western, socially conservative contexts where same-sex attraction and diverse gender identities are typically stigmatized or legally prohibited (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). This dearth is particularly striking for Muslim-majority nations like Pakistan, where homosexuality is criminalized and widely viewed as a violation of Islamic principles (Blidon & Brunn, 2022). The limited research exploring LGBTQ+ experiences in Muslim families finds that religious/cultural values often create challenging family dynamics and strong pressures to conceal one's identity ((El-Oqlah, 2021)).

Qualitative studies highlight Pakistani LGBTQ+ individuals' fears of rejection, ostracization, and potential honour killings from family members,

driving many to lead profoundly closeted lives (Yilmaz & Barton, 2021). Faced with these high stakes, open disclosure of one's identity is relatively rare, with most opting for careful self-censorship regarding their personal lives (Silver, 2022). The resulting lack of self-expression strains parent-child relationships and exacerbates feelings of isolation (Bhargava et al., 2024). However, factors promoting resilience and maintaining family ties in this context remain underexplored (Jafari, Kassan, Reay, & Climie, 2022). By highlighting the resourcefulness of Pakistani LGBTQ+ teenagers in fostering understanding through open discussions of non-identity topics, subtle expressions of individuality, and patient bridge-building, the research counters prevailing narratives depicting LGBTQ+ Muslim youth as powerless victims. Instead, it reveals their tenacity in preserving cherished family ties despite identity conflicts and lack of affirmation (Walsh, 2015). This advances understanding of resilience processes, relationship maintenance strategies, and how LGBTQ+ individuals reconcile seemingly discordant social identities in cultures where diverse sexualities remain stigmatized (Trinh & Faulkner, 2023). The study also enriches the literature on disclosure and outness for LGBTQ+ individuals from collectivistic, honour-oriented cultures (Eklöf & Haniya, 2023). Unlike Western norms valorizing authenticity through open self-expression, the findings reflect an alternative, more circumscribed approach to identity management. Given the significant risks and potential backlash, communication is carefully regulated to avoid directly challenging societal/religious taboos. This aligns with work on navigating dual identities for Muslim LGBTQ+ individuals, who may prioritize family/religious ties over full outness (Beck, 2016).

While the teenage sample provides a unique developmental perspective, future research should explore whether similar relational strategies persist into adulthood for LGBTQ+ Pakistanis. Cross-cultural comparisons would further clarify whether these patterns reflect broader collectivistic values versus being specific to Muslim cultural contexts (Grossman, Campo, Feitosa, & Salas, 2021). Longitudinal designs tracking parents' evolving attitudes could shed light on factors promoting greater acceptance over time. Despite some limitations, the study makes a vital scholarly contribution. By centring the lived experiences of an underrepresented population, it challenges monolithic portrayals and advances more nuanced understandings of

LGBTQ+ Muslim family life. As debates continue around LGBTQ+ rights in Islamic societies, such empirical work is essential for informing policies, social services, and supportive interventions. The findings can help foster greater cultural humility among providers working with LGBTQ+ Muslim clients and families. In contexts where rigid religious orthodoxy governs societal norms, LGBTQ+ individuals face immense challenges in reconciling stigmatized identities with deeply-held cultural values. A study by Munir and Noor (2023) provides a rare glimpse into these oft-overlooked lived realities. By giving voice to Pakistani LGBTQ+ youth and documenting their resilience in the face of non-affirmation, it represents an important step towards more inclusive understandings of family bonds and identity processes. Such perspectives are crucial as psychological research endeavours to become a truly global, culturally-responsive discipline reflective of diverse human experiences.

## **6. Analysis Process**

To systematically analyse the rich qualitative data gathered from interviews with LGBTQ+ youth and their parents, we employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. This inductive, data-driven method allowed us to identify, analyse, and report on the key themes that emerged, grounding our interpretations firmly in the participants' own perspectives and experiences. First, all 24 interview transcripts were carefully read and re-read by the full research team to ensure deep familiarization with the data. We recorded initial impressions, points of resonance, and nascent concepts that began to take shape. A collaborative discussion session was then held where each team member shared their observations and began the process of tentative open coding.

In the second phase, two researchers undertook the primary coding process, working iteratively to develop a comprehensive coding framework that would capture the nuances and complexities of the participants' narratives. This involved a mixture of *in vivo* codes derived directly from the data, as well as more conceptual codes drawing on psychological constructs around identity, family dynamics, and minority stress. To ensure rigour and to mitigate individual biases, we employed two more researchers who acted as external auditors. They reviewed the coding framework, examined samples of

coded data, and provided critical feedback to refine and consolidate the codes. Any discrepancies were thoroughly discussed until consensus was reached.

Phase three involved clustering the codes into broader themes that reflected overarching patterns in the data. The team met regularly to engage in collaborative theme development, moving back and forth between the data, codes, and emerging themes. This allowed us to identify both the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and points of confluence with their parents' perspectives. Throughout phases four and five, we continuously reviewed and refined the thematic structure, interrogating each theme's boundaries, internal coherence, and relationship to the broader data set. This recursive process enabled us to distil the most salient, meaningful themes that encapsulated the essence of the participants' stories.

Finally, in phase six, we crafted detailed written profiles of each master theme and its constituent subthemes. These were supplemented by illustrative quotes to foreground the voices of the LGBTQ+ youth and their parents. The entire analytical journey, including our researcher positionalities and any potential biases, was transparently documented to establish the trustworthiness and credibility of our interpretations. By rigorously applying Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, we were able to construct a rich, multifaceted account of how LGBTQ+ Pakistani Muslim youth navigate the complex terrain of family relationships in the face of cultural and religious non-acceptance. The voices, experiences, and resilience strategies that emerged from the data provide unparalleled insights into this under-researched phenomenon.

## **7. Results**

### **Strategies for Preserving Parent-Child Relationships**

The LGBTQ+ Muslim youth in our study demonstrated an array of thoughtful strategies aimed at nurturing and preserving their relationship with their parents, despite the lack of affirmation around their sexual and gender identities. These approaches reflected a nuanced navigation of the tensions between their true selves and familial/cultural expectations.

### **7.1 Selective self-disclosure**

Overwhelmingly, participants described a carefully calibrated process of deciding what aspects of their LGBTQ+ identity to share with their parents. While some had come out partially, the vast majority opted to avoid direct discussions of sexuality or gender altogether. As one youth expressed, "I know my parents could never accept that part of me, so I just don't bring it up. It's not worth the risk of them rejecting me."

Instead, LGBTQ+ youth focused their conversations with parents on academic goals, religious observances, and other innocuous topics where they could be their authentic selves without triggering conflict or condemnation. This selective self-disclosure, though borne of necessity, allowed them to maintain a sense of emotional closeness with their parents by finding common ground on non-identity-related matters. As one participant described, "When we talk about school or our family traditions, I feel like my parents really see me, you know? Not just the 'gay son' label." By avoiding direct discussions of their sexual orientation or gender identity, youth were able to cultivate warmth and understanding around shared interests and values. This preserved important familial bonds, even as they concealed core aspects of their personhood.

The decision to withhold information about their LGBTQ+ identity was a strategic one, driven by an acute awareness of the risks involved. Participants expressed profound fears of parental rejection, estrangement, or even honour-based violence if they were to fully disclose. As one youth poignantly stated, "I love my parents, and I know they love me. But I can't ever let them know the truth about me. It would destroy everything." Through this careful modulation of self-disclosure, LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth demonstrated remarkable resilience in safeguarding cherished family relationships, even at the cost of an authentic, integrated sense of self. Their stories reveal the immense psychological toll and fragmentation experienced as they continuously negotiate which parts of themselves to reveal or conceal around their parents.

## **7.2 Emphasizing shared interests**

Beyond calibrating what they shared about their LGBTQ+ identity, youth also deliberately highlighted areas of mutual understanding and affinity with parents. They bonded over hobbies, intellectual pursuits, and family traditions, forging connections through shared activities and values. This allowed them to preserve cherished family ties without their sexual orientation or gender identity becoming the central focus. As one participant explained, "We can talk for hours about books or our favourite TV shows. In those moments, I feel like I can be myself, not just the version of me they expect." By intentionally elevating commonalities, LGBTQ+ youth created opportunities for authentic self-expression and belonging within the family context.

Rather than steering conversations towards their minority identities, which they knew would likely provoke rejection, these young people chose to emphasize their common interests and values with parents. This enabled them to nurture feelings of closeness and acceptance, even as they concealed the full truth of who they are. One youth described it as finding "pockets of realness" amidst the constant self-censorship required to preserve family bonds. In these moments of genuine connection over shared hobbies or cultural traditions, LGBTQ+ participants could momentarily shed the persona they presented to appease parental expectations. As another participant expressed, "That's when I feel like I'm not just their 'daughter' - I'm their daughter who also happens to like girls."

Through this strategic foregrounding of shared interests and activities, LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth demonstrated resilience in carving out spaces for partial self-expression. While they could not be fully open about their identities, they found ways to affirm their authentic selves and feel seen by parents in limited, carefully managed ways. This allowed them to maintain vital family ties, even as they contended with the distress of having to suppress core aspects of who they are.

## **7.3 Patience and gradual change**

Cognizant of the profoundly conservative cultural context, LGBTQ+ youth approached their relationships with parents with remarkable forbearance. They recognized that abrupt, radical self-disclosure could irrevocably rupture

family bonds. So they opted for a gradual, incremental strategy; slowly testing boundaries with minor non-conformities, carefully gauging parental reactions, and waiting for the "right time" to broach more sensitive subjects.

As one participant described, "It's like I have to earn the right to be myself, little by little." This patient, nuanced approach reflected the youth's deep-seated value of family unity and desire to avoid outright rejection, even if it came at the cost of fully expressing their identities.

Rather than demanding immediate acceptance of their LGBTQ+ status, these young people demonstrated an acute understanding of their parents' conservative worldviews. They recognized that any sudden, overt challenge to traditional gender norms or heterosexual expectations could jeopardize the family relationships that were their lifeline. As one participant poignantly stated, "I know my parents would be devastated if they found out the truth. I can't do that to them; I just can't." So LGBTQ+ youth engaged in a painstaking process of slowly pushing the boundaries, gauging their parents' reactions, and gradually introducing more authentic expressions of self. This might involve subtle changes in dress, hobbies, or mannerisms; minor non-conformities that tested the limits of parental acceptance without triggering outright rejection.

By embodying remarkable patience and emotional intelligence, these young people preserved crucial family connections while also carving out tentative spaces to explore their identities. As one participant reflected, "It's a dance; I take one step towards being myself, then pull back to make sure I don't lose everything. It's exhausting, but I have to do it." This gradual, incremental approach underscores the profound value LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth placed on maintaining familial bonds. Though it came at great personal cost in terms of self-expression and integration, their resilience in forging a path toward authenticity, however piecemeal, was truly remarkable.

#### **7.4 Prioritizing family cohesion**

The LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth in our study demonstrated an unwavering commitment to preserving family unity and honouring cultural and religious values around filial piety, even in the face of non-acceptance of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This emerged as a driving force underlying

their strategic efforts to sustain relationships with their parents. For these young people, the family represented a sacrosanct source of identity, belonging, and cultural/spiritual grounding that they were deeply reluctant to forfeit. As one participant poignantly expressed, "My parents might not understand me, but they're still my parents. I can't imagine my life without them." This powerful pull of familial belonging motivated their restraint in self-disclosure and their persistent efforts to find points of connection with their parents, no matter how fraught.

Rather than risking outright rejection through radical truth-telling, the LGBTQ+ youth engaged in the painstaking work of gradually broadening the boundaries of parental acceptance. They tested the limits of openness through small, incremental steps, employing the strategic approaches of selective self-disclosure, emphasizing shared interests, and patient boundary-pushing. Through these multifaceted efforts, they were able to sustain important family bonds and avoid the devastating prospect of complete estrangement. As one participant reflected, "It's not perfect, but at least I still have my family in my life."

However, this constant self-monitoring and fragmentation of their authentic selves exacts a heavy psychological toll. As one youth lamented, "I have to be three different people – the perfect Muslim son, the fun friend, and the real me that no one gets to see. It's exhausting."

### **7.5 Reliance on alternate support systems**

When LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth were unable to find acceptance and affirmation within their immediate family contexts, many turned to alternative support systems to meet their needs for belonging, validation, and psychological wellbeing. These external sources played a vital role in mitigating the distress of familial estrangement.

Participants frequently described seeking out LGBTQ+ youth support groups, both in-person and online, as crucial lifelines. Within these communities, they could openly express their identities, share experiences, and access much-needed emotional support from peers who intimately understood their struggles. As one youth expressed, "It's the only place I can truly be myself without having to hide anything."



Beyond peer-based communities, some participants also found solace and acceptance from sympathetic teachers, counsellors, or other mentors. These trusted adults provided safe spaces for self-expression, offered guidance on navigating identity conflicts, and advocated for the young person's wellbeing when their families were unsupportive. As one participant shared, "My teacher is the only adult who knows the real me. She's been so kind and supportive when I had nowhere else to turn."

The ability to access these alternate support systems, whether through LGBTQ+ youth groups or individual allies, emerged as a crucial coping mechanism. By cultivating a sense of belonging and affirmation outside the family, participants were able to bolster their resilience and mitigate the deleterious mental health impacts of familial non-acceptance. As one youth described, "When my parents found out and kicked me out for a while, those support groups were a lifeline. I don't know what I would have done without them. They really saved me from falling apart completely." Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating, "My teacher is the only one who's ever truly seen and accepted me for who I am. That kind of unconditional love makes all the difference."

However, the need to seek external validation and belonging also highlighted the profound void left by lacking familial support. Participants' reliance on alternate systems underscored the central role parents and kin networks traditionally play in Pakistani Muslim culture. When these vital sources of emotional nourishment and identity affirmation were withheld, youth were left to frantically construct scaffolding for their wellbeing from whatever resources they could find. While these external support systems provided crucial respite and sustenance, they could never fully replace the familial bonds that Pakistani LGBTQ+ youth so fiercely cherish. The resilience demonstrated in cultivating these alternate supports was remarkable, but it also pointed to an underlying ache – the desire to be loved, accepted, and celebrated for their full, authentic selves within the family unit itself.

## **7.6 Nuanced Identity Management Strategies**

Beyond the binary choices of concealing or fully revealing their LGBTQ+ identities, the participants in our study demonstrated remarkably nuanced and

sophisticated tactics for selectively expressing fragments of their authentic selves. Rather than an all-or-nothing approach, they engaged in a complex dance of calibrated self-expression, testing the boundaries of parental acceptance through carefully calculated moves.

One key strategy involved the use of ambiguous language when discussing romantic interests or gender presentation. As one youth explained, "I'll talk about having a 'special someone' instead of using labels like 'girlfriend.' That way, I'm not exactly lying, but I'm also not rocking the boat too much." This linguistic finesse allowed them to maintain a veneer of conformity while also subtly hinting at their true identities.

Participants also utilized their appearance and mannerisms as a medium for partial self-expression. Several described adopting a more androgynous aesthetic – wearing clothing or hairstyles that deviated from rigid gender norms, but without crossing into overtly non-conformist territory. As one participant shared, "I'll paint my nails or wear a little bit of eyeliner. Little things that make me feel more true to myself, but that my parents can kind of overlook or explain away."

The youth engaged in a carefully calibrated process of incrementally testing the boundaries of parental acceptance. They would introduce minor non-conformities – a new hobby, a shift in academic/career interests, etc. – and closely observe their parents' reactions. If the responses were relatively benign, they might cautiously expand the parameters of their self-expression. As one individual described, "It's like a dance. I take one step, then wait to see if they'll let me take another." Through this nuanced navigation of identity management, LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth carved out fragile spaces for partial authenticity. By selectively revealing and concealing different facets of themselves, they could maintain familial bonds while also retaining core elements of their true identities. As one participant aptly summarized, "I'm not the perfect Muslim daughter they want. But I'm also not the version of myself that no one's allowed to see."

This intricate juggling act, though psychologically taxing, allowed the youth to preserve crucial support systems and avoid the devastating prospect of complete familial rejection. Their stories highlighted the incredible resourcefulness and resilience required to reconcile the competing pulls of

cultural/religious duty and personal identity within a profoundly conservative social context.

## **8. Discussion**

The core purpose of this study is to provide invaluable insights into the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslim youth in Pakistan, trying to bring forth the profound tensions they navigate in preserving appropriate family relationships despite profound cultural and religious non-acceptance of their sexual and gender identities. The findings of our study powerfully challenge prevailing narratives that depict these young people as passive victims, instead elevating their remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in carving out spaces for partial self-expression and maintaining crucial familial bonds. A core theme that emerges is the immense value these LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth place on family unity and fulfilling cultural/religious duties of filial piety. Acutely aware of the grave risks of outright identity disclosure – including potential rejection, estrangement, and even honour-based violence – the participants demonstrated an acute understanding of the primacy of the family unit within their sociocultural context. Rather than risking the shattering of these foundational relationships, they engaged in a complex dance of selective self-disclosure, carefully calibrating what aspects of their identity they choose to reveal to parents.

The existing research on LGBTQ+ individuals from conservative religious and cultural backgrounds, particularly in Muslim-majority societies, is limited. Much of the literature has focused on the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in Western, individualistic contexts, where the emphasis is often on open self-disclosure and the pursuit of personal authenticity. This study, by contrast, provides a valuable window into the lived realities of LGBTQ+ Muslim youth in Pakistan, where familial and cultural ties carry immense significance, and the stakes of identity disclosure are extraordinarily high. Previous studies on LGBTQ+ Muslims have documented the profound conflicts and identity management challenges they face, often leading to concealment, compartmentalization, and complex negotiations between their sexual/gender identities and religious/cultural roles (Chinwuba, 2014). The current research builds upon these insights, delving deeper into the relational dynamics between LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth and their families. By centring

the voices and perspectives of both the young people and their parents, the study offers a nuanced, multifaceted understanding of the intricate strategies employed to preserve cherished family ties despite the lack of affirmation for sexual and gender diversity. This study contributes to the growing body of literature exploring LGBTQ+ experiences in non-Western, socially conservative contexts (Costa & Shenkman, 2020). It provides a crucial counterpoint to narratives that tend to portray LGBTQ+ individuals from these settings as passive victims, powerless in the face of societal and familial rejection. Instead, the findings illuminate the remarkable resilience and agency of Pakistani LGBTQ+ youth as they navigate the complex terrain of identity, family, and culture.

The study's methodological approach is a particular strength, as the research team made concerted efforts to ensure cultural humility, ethical rigour, and multiple perspectival lenses throughout the data collection and analysis process. The diversity within the team, comprising both insider and outsider perspectives, allowed for productive dialogue, critical examination of assumptions, and a nuanced interpretation of the participants' lived experiences. The decision to conduct separate interviews with LGBTQ+ youth and their parents, while maintaining confidentiality, is also laudable. This approach enabled the researchers to capture the distinct narratives and perceptions of both groups, providing a more holistic understanding of the family dynamics at play. The use of semi-structured interviews, facilitated in the participants' native languages, further enhanced the depth and authenticity of the data gathered. The rigorous thematic analysis methodology, grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, lends credibility to the study's findings. The iterative coding process, consensus-building among the research team, and transparent documentation of the analytical journey contribute to the overall trustworthiness and credibility of the interpretations. That said, the study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size of 12 LGBTQ+ youth and 12 parents, while suitable for an in-depth qualitative exploration, may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific context of Pakistan. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes the researchers from examining the potential evolution of parental attitudes and family relationships over time. This study's focus on the narratives of LGBTQ+ youth and their parents raises questions about the

absence of perspectives from other family members, such as siblings or extended relatives, who may play influential roles in shaping the familial dynamics. Incorporating these additional voices could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the relational complexities within Pakistani Muslim families.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study challenges prevailing Western-centric models of LGBTQ+ identity development and family relationships, which tend to emphasize individual autonomy, open self-disclosure, and the pursuit of personal authenticity. In contrast, the experiences of Pakistani LGBTQ+ youth highlight the crucial importance of familial belonging, cultural/religious values, and the strategic negotiation of identities within collectivistic social structures. This study underscores the need for psychological research to adopt a more culturally responsive and globally inclusive lens when examining LGBTQ+ issues. By centring the voices of an underrepresented population, the findings reveal the diverse ways in which LGBTQ+ individuals navigate identity, family, and social belonging across different cultural contexts. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of resilience and identity management strategies beyond the Western paradigm.

We believe that our results can inform future research directions, particularly in exploring the long-term trajectories of LGBTQ+ individuals' relationships with their families in conservative Muslim societies. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of parental attitudes and family dynamics over time would shed light on the factors that facilitate greater acceptance and support, or persistent non-affirmation. Cross-cultural comparisons between LGBTQ+ experiences in Muslim-majority nations and other socially conservative cultural contexts could also yield valuable insights into the interplay of religion, family, and identity. Such research would enhance our understanding of the diverse ways in which LGBTQ+ individuals navigate the tensions between personal authenticity and cultural/familial obligations across various societal settings. The focus on the narratives of LGBTQ+ youth and their parents raises questions about the absence of perspectives from other family members, such as siblings or extended relatives, who may play influential roles in shaping the familial relationships. Incorporating these additional voices could have provided a

more comprehensive understanding of the relational complexities within Pakistani Muslim families.

### **9. Limitations and Future Directions**

One key limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of 12 LGBTQ+ youth and 12 parents. While appropriate for an in-depth qualitative exploration, this limited sample may not capture the full breadth of experiences and strategies employed by LGBTQ+ individuals within the broader Pakistani Muslim community. Expanding the study to include a larger, more diverse sample would enhance the generalizability of the findings and potentially uncover additional nuances in the relational dynamics between LGBTQ+ youth and their families. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study presents constraints in understanding the longitudinal trajectories of these family relationships. Longitudinal research that follows LGBTQ+ Pakistani youth and their parents over an extended period could yield valuable insights into the evolution of parental attitudes, the factors that facilitate greater acceptance, and the long-term impacts on the young people's well-being and identity development. Future studies could also consider incorporating the perspectives of other family members, such as siblings or extended relatives, who may play influential roles in shaping the familial dynamics surrounding LGBTQ+ youth. Exploring these additional family relationships and power structures could provide a more holistic understanding of the complex web of interpersonal dynamics at play. Moreover, comparative research across different Muslim-majority countries could shed light on the nuances and contextual factors that shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in various cultural and religious settings.

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